

5-14-2010

The Bomb on the Bayou: Nuclear Fear and Public Indifference in New Orleans, 1945 - 1966

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The Bomb on the Bayou:
Nuclear Fear and Public Indifference in New Orleans, 1945 - 1966

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
The Department of History

By

Gregory J. Schloesser

B.A., Loyola University, 1983

May 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis almost never came to pass. The reasons can be placed squarely on my shoulders, along with a not-so-nice lady named Katrina.

I graduated from Loyola University back in 1983 and aggressively pursued a career in the insurance field. My love of history remained, however, and I continued to regularly read history-related books, particularly those pertaining to World War II. With my wife's encouragement, I entered the History Graduate program at the University of New Orleans in the Fall of 2001, taking one class per semester in pursuit of a Master's Degree. In the summer of 2005, we fulfilled a long-time dream by moving to East Tennessee. Fortunately, the university was kind enough to allow me to take my final course as an independent study. Fate had other plans. Hurricane Katrina ravaged the city in late August, closing the university and, due to my insurance business, occupying my time for several years. After a four-year hiatus, I finally completed my final class and began work on this thesis.

As many have stated in the past, no thesis is ever completed alone. It truly is the work of numerous people and entities. First and foremost, I want to thank Dr. Günter Bischof. I have had the great privilege and pleasure of being a student in many of his classes. His knowledge of history, particularly World War II and the Cold War period, continues to amaze and mesmerize me. I am continually stunned by his incredible knowledge and keen insight into all of the nuances of these periods of history. He has been a true inspiration to me. Yes, he has also been somewhat intimidating, as I am readily aware that my knowledge of these subjects pales in comparison to his. Yet that is how it is supposed to be in a teacher-student relationship. In spite of his superior knowledge, he has always treated me as an equal, while at the same time encouraging, urging, and pushing me to do more. Yes, he has been tough, but that is how it should be. I am grateful to him for this, and for constantly forcing me to look at situations from a different angle.

I also want to express my gratitude to the other professors at the University of New Orleans who, without exception, conducted extremely interesting and informative classes. They all took a personal interest in me, and truly helped expand my knowledge, challenging me to become a better student and historian. In particular I want to thank Dr. William Stiebing, whose course on Ancient Greece was simply fascinating. I still talk about matters he taught us during

that class, and continue to reference the paper on the Thera-Atlantis connection he encouraged me to write.

While I did not have her as a professor, I cannot fail to mention Dr. Mary Mitchell. She has been a tremendous help in getting me back to complete my graduate work, helping me navigate through the myriad of forms and papers that needed to be completed. She has been a consistent source of encouragement, constantly reassuring me that all would work out in the end.

Further, I wish to thank Dr. Robert Dupont and Dr. Michael Mizell-Nelson, both of whom agreed to review the various drafts of my papers, provide input, and serve on my thesis committee.

I also want to thank all of the people I interviewed in the compilation of this paper. Each of them took time to speak with me and share their thoughts about what was certainly a troubling part of their lives. In particular, I want to express my gratitude to Richard and Katherine Starr, who opened their home to a stranger so I could tour the bomb shelter located underneath their house. They treated me like family. The generosity of these fine folks is greatly appreciated.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not mention my loving wife Gail. She has been extremely patient, tolerant and supportive throughout this entire process. Many nights I was away from home attending class or doing research. Many nights I was sequestered in my office reading mountains of books and articles for my classes, or writing yet another paper. She never once complained, and constantly encouraged me to finish the work and obtain my degree. She has been a bastion of support and encouragement.

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ABSTRACT

At the height of nuclear tension, governments at all levels took steps to both educate and protect their citizens. Plans that included mass evacuations and shelters were put forth to protect the public and prepare for the seemingly inevitable war with the Soviet Union. These efforts faced tremendous obstacles, including a persistent sense of apathy amongst the public.

Many authors insist that life under the persistent threat of a nuclear holocaust had a profound effect on the American psyche. The main thesis of this paper argues that while people were undoubtedly aware of the potential danger, those greatly affected and traumatized by it were the exception, particularly in the New Orleans area. Most people recognized the danger, but opted to not let it dominate their thoughts. They were far more concerned with their own interests, including family, career and home ownership.

KEYWORDS

Civil Defense

Nuclear Fear

Nuclear Anxiety

New Orleans Civil Defense

Fallout Shelters

Bomb Shelters

THE BOMB ON THE BAYOU: NUCLEAR FEAR AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE IN NEW ORLEANS, 1945 - 1964

I was born in the heart of New Orleans in November 1961 at the end of the period that is commonly considered by our society to be the ‘Baby Boom’ generation. Although my birth was sixteen years following the conclusion of World War II and the dropping of the atomic bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the world and its citizens were still experiencing a tremendous impact from the effects of those momentous events and the subsequent development of more powerful and deadly nuclear weapons. There is little doubt that no family – even those living in the back bayous of Louisiana – was immune to the stark reality of living life under the ever-present potential threat of a nuclear attack and the massive carnage and destruction that would inevitably result. But just how deep did this fear run and did it truly alter the day-to-day life of the average New Orleanian? Attempting to discover an answer to this question is the objective of this paper.

Within America, did there exist a great deal of fear and anxiety over the potential threat of a nuclear war? Numerous books and journal articles have been written on this subject. According to some of these authors, not only did this fear exist amongst the politicians, scientists and people in positions of power, but a deep, persisting fear and anxiety was also prevalent amongst the average American family. Indeed, several suggested that living life under the never-ceasing potential threat of a nuclear war and the predicted holocaust that would result had a profound effect on the average American and made a tremendous impact on their day-to-day life.

My research examines what authors, scholars, journalists, prominent figures and the mass media – including Hollywood – have said about this current of fear that was purportedly

coursing through American society. I examine closely their comments and evidence presented in support of their assertions.

As governmental officials became more and more concerned about the possibility of a nuclear war with the Soviet Union and the potentially devastating effects that this would have on its citizens, a wide range of plans were proposed to help protect the people and provide a modicum of defense against such a holocaust. Most of these efforts fell under the umbrella of the 'Civil Defense' program, which was an intense, albeit relatively short-lived program directed and encouraged by national, state and local governments.

As one of the country's major ports, New Orleans was a potential target of an enemy attack. Many experts and civil defense planners predicted a grim fate for the city in the event of such an assault. As was the case on the national level, these officials attempted to both warn and educate the public, urging them to take steps to protect themselves and their families. New Orleans and its citizens did take some steps to protect themselves against what many thought was the inevitable nuclear attack. Many of these efforts mirrored those that were occurring throughout the nation, but New Orleans also proposed and pursued many unique programs and approaches.

What effects did living life under the threat of a nuclear war have on American citizens and New Orleanians in particular? Dozens of public opinion polls and surveys were taken during the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's in efforts to gauge the public's opinion on a variety of topics related to the nuclear threat. These polls included opinions on the public's fear and anxiety, fear of radioactive fallout, civil defense measures, and even their outlook for the future with living life under the threat of the bomb as a harsh reality. Was fear as rampant and

pervasive as many authors and experts espouse, or was it a condition people simply learned to live with?

One of the best, albeit not infallible sources to ascertain the answer to questions of nuclear fear is personal interviews with people who lived during that era. The sample interviews conducted relate the personal remembrances and experiences of over a dozen men and women who lived and “grew-up” during the period upon which this paper concentrates: 1945 – 1964. The remarkable testimony of these people helps shed a bright light on just how much of an impact ‘the bomb’ had on the everyday life of the average person who lived in New Orleans during this time of great peril.

FEAR AND ANXIETY?

“...the end will be deadly fear everywhere ... A world of vast fear and apprehension will be our lot and that of our children ... We will eat fear, sleep fear, live in fear and die in fear.”¹

If one is to believe the body of work produced by numerous authors on the subject of living life under the threat of a potential nuclear war, an image would emerge of a world gone mad. The ominous presence of an atomic attack hung over the populace like a dark, menacing cloud, shaped in the form of an ominous, poisonous mushroom. Fear was rampant. Anxiety riddled the human psyche. In the new nuclear age following World War II, coping with day-to-day life was at best difficult, at worst a living nightmare. According to cultural historian Margot A. Henriksen, “... the nation experienced a sort of mass hysteria peculiar to the atomic age.”²

Few could argue that the world did not change dramatically following the dropping of the atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, a momentous event that simultaneously helped close the door on World War II and also ushered the world into an exciting, yet dangerous new

period – the age of the atom. Seldom in the course of human history has one event changed the world so drastically, provoking both optimism and fear at the same time. This was one such momentous, earth-shattering event. Indeed, in his book *By the Bomb's Early Light*, Paul Boyer claims, “All the major elements of our contemporary engagement with the nuclear reality took shape literally within days of Hiroshima.”³

A surge of optimism was born with this new nuclear age. Everything from atomic-powered vehicles, to ridiculously inexpensive electrical power, to miraculous cures for cancer were forecast, all made possible by the harnessing of the power of the split atom. Countless articles were written and speeches delivered on the beneficial uses of the atom and the wonderful changes society would experience due to its remarkable, yet mysterious powers. Although great benefits were eventually derived by society from nuclear technology, the passage of time would ultimately prove most of these optimistic prophecies false.

The birth of the nuclear age did not only bring with it boundless optimism, however. At the very instant the mushroom cloud was seen, a creeping fear and dread was also born. There was an immediate sense of awe over the immense power displayed and many felt that such power should be reserved only for God, as Margot Henriksen suggests:

“The atom bomb shook the foundations of the physical and psychological universe. As natural daylight replaced the searing light produced by the blast, there emerged a hazy sense among physicists that mankind had finally over-stepped that fragile boundary between conquering nature for the benefit of future humanity and conquering nature at the risk of human survival. The tightrope that science and technology had long walked was now excruciatingly taut, and henceforth mankind teetered on the brink of annihilation.”⁴

Fear began to creep into the writings and reports of journalists, novelists and scholars. Shortly after the bomb's dropping, respected journalist Edward R. Murrow commented, “Seldom, if

ever, has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured.”⁵ This fear soon spread to the citizenry and began to appear in editorial pages of newspapers throughout the country. John Haynes Holmes was the minister at the Community Church of New York City. Shortly after hearing the news of the bombing of Hiroshima and the cataclysmic devastation the explosion had wrought, he recalled:

“Everything else seemed suddenly to become insignificant. I seemed to grow cold, as though I had been transported to the waste spaces of the moon. The summer beauty seemed to vanish, and the waves of the sea to be pounding upon the shores of an empty world ... For I knew that the final crisis in human history had come. What that atomic bomb had done to Japan, it could do to us.”⁶

The news media quickly pounced upon this sense of impending doom. An editorial appearing in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on August 7, 1945 warned that scientists may well have “signed the mammalian world’s death warrant and deeded an earth in ruins to the ants.”⁷ The *Christian Advocate* warned in September 1945, “Let there be no delusions ... the atomic bomb is here to stay and is destined, in our opinion, to hold the world in the grip of terror for the next one hundred years.”⁸

There was a steady bombardment of articles on the threat of the atomic bomb from the nation’s media, with hundreds of articles appearing in a wide variety of publications. Many began postulating that this endless diet of “doom and gloom” had a tremendous and harmful impact on the average American citizen and family. The media was replete with revealing testimonies of individuals who confessed to experiencing deep fear and dread, as this letter from a new mother found in the personal papers of radio commentator H.V. Kaltenborn reveals:

“Since then I have hardly been able to smile, the future seems so utterly grim for our two little boys. Most of the time I have been in tears or near-tears, and fleeting but torturing regrets that I have brought children into the world to face such a dreadful thing as this

have shivered through me. It seems that it will be for them all their lives like living on a keg of dynamite which may go off at any moment, and which undoubtedly will go off before their lives have progressed very far.”⁹

Whether such letters represented a true sense of fear and apprehension being experienced by the average American or whether they were isolated to a small segment of the population will be discussed later in this paper when we examine the numerous public opinion polls that were conducted during this era.

Nevertheless, many authors and historians contend that this fear was pervasive and cut a wide swath across American society. Dr. Jerah Johnson, retired history professor at the University of New Orleans, expressed the following sentiments about the mood of the populace during the early days of the Cold War, “...everyone in the aware world had at the forefront of their brain all the time the distinct possibility of a nuclear war, which would mean the end of everything.”¹⁰ There is little doubt that a significant number of scientists – many of whom were actually involved in the development of the atomic bomb – developed fears of the potential devastating effects of this new technology. Professor Otto Hahn, the first man to split the atom, voiced an appeal to mankind to “shun the ways leading to destruction. Terrified, one sees that science is equipping mankind with the means to destroy itself.”¹¹

An intense, albeit short-lived and ultimately unsuccessful ‘scientists movement’ began, with one of their main intents being to warn government officials and the public of the immense dangers. Injecting a healthy dose of fear into the veins of the public was a main tactic. Francis Vivian Drake emphasized the need for this in a 1947 letter to J. Robert Oppenheimer, “I think that we are both agreed that a sense of fear is probably necessary to break public apathy.”¹² Other scientists agreed. One scientist claimed the goal was to “scare the pants off”¹³ the public,

while another asserted in a *New Yorker* magazine article, “Only one tactic is dependable – the preaching of doom.”¹⁴

Although ultimately unsuccessful in its efforts to achieve international control of nuclear technology and weapons, the scientist movement certainly had considerable success in this alternative goal of fomenting deep apprehensions in the public-at-large. Its tactics and writings were often blunt, terrifying and often exaggerated. Executive secretary of the Federation of American Scientists W.A. Higinbotham wrote in a 1946 *New York Times* article, “you will be haunted by the overpowering knowledge that if war is declared, you, your house, or your business, may disappear in the next second.”¹⁵ Another article, written by the Federation’s publicist Michael Amrine, appeared in *Collier’s* under the name of Harold Urey. The article, entitled “I’m a Frightened Man,” was very blunt in its intentions: “I write this to frighten you. I’m a frightened man myself. All the scientists I know are frightened – frightened for their lives – and frightened for your life.”¹⁶ Perhaps the most enduring icon of this short-lived scientists’ public concern is the “Bulletin Clock,” commonly known as the “doomsday clock”. This clock was often depicted on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, showing just how close we were to nuclear Armageddon. While the scientists’ movement may have died, the doomsday clock endures in the American psyche.

It wasn’t just the scientists and journalists, however, who served-up an endless buffet of nuclear horror stories. Hollywood, too, played its role. Major film releases such as *Dr. Strangelove* and *On the Beach* portrayed a future doomed by inevitable nuclear conflict. A flood of science fiction movies washed over America, all somehow blaming nuclear technology run amok for the mutant horrors that threatened society in their unique and often comical visions of the future. While several authors, most particularly Margot Henriksen, have attempted to tie this

series of nuclear-themed films to an underlying current of fear and discontent in American society, a possible alternative conclusion is that these films were made for the primary purpose of earning money for the Hollywood studios. Good science fiction sells and is popular with the American public. This does not necessarily mean there is a rampant fear of the subject matter seething beneath the surface within society. Still, Hollywood often does produce films that reflect the current mood and interests of the American public, so the movies being produced and released during this era are at the least a reflection of what was on the mind of Americans.

An American media hungry for titillating stories that would entice, fascinate and even horrify the public were more than eager to jump onto the nuclear holocaust bandwagon. The result was an avalanche of articles, columns and stories on the potential horrors of nuclear technology and the need for international control. Ultimately, however, the “sky is falling” approach was too much. What developed within the American public according to many observers was a pervading sense of apathy. Some have attributed this to the development of a sense of hopelessness, akin to a “there’s nothing we can do about it, so why worry?” approach. As Lewis Mumford commented in 1946, “The louder they shout to us, the more inaudible their voices become.”¹⁷

Refusing to believe that Americans simply would not allow their lives to devolve into a state of constant fear and worry, many scholars, authors and psychologists have attempted to depict this sense of apathy as an attempt to mask a deeper sense of foreboding and worry that was seething just below the surface. In her book *Homeward Bound*, social historian and author Elaine Tyler May cites a study by psychologist Robert J. Lifton attributing this “nuclear numbing” to “the powerful psychic hold that the fear of nuclear annihilation had on the nation’s subconscious.”¹⁸ In *Dr. Strangelove’s America*, Henriksen claims that many psychologists saw

in this general absence of worry “behavior signs of mental disturbance: Americans were losing contact with reality.”¹⁹

Seemingly prone to taking large leaps of association, Henriksen also relates two completely separate articles that appeared in the April 5, 1954 issue of *Newsweek*. Both of these articles were touted on the front page of that issue. One centered on “Springtime Summer Travel” and depicted young women cruising the highways of America in a sporty convertible, while the other was entitled “The Bomb: What Odds for Survival Now?” and was only advertised on the cover with a news banner. In a bold leap of association, Henriksen claims that the two young ladies in the picture are oblivious to the “threat hanging directly over their heads” and that this “symbolized America’s overall psychological dislocation in the atomic age.”²⁰

Many social scientists and psychologists warned that this cauldron of fear would eventually erupt, causing massive chaos and upheaval within American society. Paranoia, hedonism, crime, panic, juvenile delinquency – all would be by-products of the underlying fear, anxiety and uncertainty caused by the nuclear age. Indeed, it seemed that nuclear technology was the scapegoat for just about every condition that ailed society. According to many, the fear was growing and about to erupt, and the predicted results were becoming more and more absurd. Writing in the *Ladies Home Journal*, Dorothy Thompson warned of an impending “world-wide nervous breakdown.”²¹ In *Dawn over Zero: The Story of the Atomic Bomb*, author William Laurence echoed Thompson’s sentiments: “We face increasing tensions, fears and spiritual blight ... until goaded beyond endurance, men’s minds snap and the world’s structure collapses.”²² And in the best “if you don’t feel this way, then something must be wrong with you” fashion, Chicago psychiatrist Jules H. Masserman claimed, “no sentient man or woman can

really find peace of mind and body”²³ with the threat of a nuclear holocaust hanging over mankind’s heads.

So, in spite of the predictions of numerous social scientists and psychologists, just how did American society persevere, refuse to collapse, and, indeed, prosper? We will address this question in the sections that follow.

GIVE ME SHELTER

“Mankind has been slowly degenerating, especially since 1914, and today, what do we have to look forward to? Civil defense tests, compulsory military training, cold wars, fear of the atomic bomb, the diseases that plague man, the mental case outlook?”²⁴

As the fear of potential atomic attack grew within the minds of the general public, demands were placed on government officials to “do something.” No effective military defensive system existed that could prevent enemy warheads from reaching the shores of the United States. In a 1953 article in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* newspaper, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, the Air Force Chief of Staff, commented that in the event of an enemy air attack, “75% of the attacking planes would get through our defense system.”²⁵ Even President Harry S. Truman echoed these same sentiments, stating, “There is no complete protection against an atomic air attack, but there is a great deal that can be done to reduce the number of deaths and injuries that might result.”²⁶ However, his proposals, which included the establishment of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, were widely panned by public officials as ineffective. Louisiana Adjutant General and state Civil Defense coordinator General Raymond Frederick Hufft called Truman’s proposals “no plan at all and a mere 162 pages of double-talk. As it stands today, it

means more or less a survival of the fittest as far as the states are concerned. Those with foresight and energy will suffer the least when the attack occurs.”²⁷

With military options not providing an acceptable solution, a variety of alternative plans were studied and considered by government officials on both the national and local levels, including plans of mass evacuations from major industrial cities to the breaking-up of cities, dispersing the buildings and populations over a wide area. The thinking behind such a plan was that if the enemy could not eliminate the majority of a city with a few warheads, then it simply would not be worth their effort. Even if an attack was launched, with the population and infrastructure greatly dispersed, only a small portion of an area’s population would be damaged or destroyed.²⁸

Val Peterson, Federal Civil Defense Administration Director during the Eisenhower administration and former governor of Nebraska, proposed one of the early plans that seems laughable today. Peterson postulated that “the best and most economic evacuation of American Cities in the event of an atomic attack would be for people to march out on foot.” He claimed that “the average person could walk three-to-four miles per hour, and would probably move a little faster under compulsion of an impending attack.”²⁹ Peterson claimed that an alternative would be to construct reinforced concrete shelters “some fifty-to-seventy feet underground, the cost of which would be prohibitive.”³⁰ These two plans were ultimately discarded by officials as either ineffective (little to no advance warning of imminent attack prevented mass evacuations), or too costly (cost to break-up cities and relocate its buildings and population would be exorbitantly expensive). As late as 1962, evacuation was still seen as a viable option and New Orleans’ Abridged Basic Evacuation Plan (see Appendix VII) still incorporated that tactic. Included in the Strategic Evacuation section, the plan stated “If the Civil Defense Director

concludes that an evacuation of non-essential people (children, women, sick, elderly) is prudent he will so advise the responsible head of the city government. This would be a precautionary evacuation and would make an emergency evacuation, of those left, easier to accomplish.”³¹ During that same period, however, New Orleans Civil Defense Director Charles W. Erdmann succinctly stated his feelings concerning the concept of evacuation: "Evacuation is out. We have no place to go."³² According to historian Allan M. Winkler, “The whole notion of evacuation ... suffered a fatal blow with the growing realization of the consequences of fallout. The creeping radioactive cloud that accompanied any nuclear blast minimized the value of running away.”³³

In spite of the mistrust and tension between the United States and the Soviet Union and public expectation of war between the two superpowers, extremely little had been done to prepare for a nuclear attack. According to historian Kenneth D. Rose, “by 1960, in fact, Americans by overwhelming margins had not only made no preparations for nuclear war, they had not even thought about making such preparations.” Rose cites a 1963 Hazel Gaudet Erskine poll that indicated a widespread belief amongst the public that civil defense was the responsibility of the government and not of private citizens.³⁴ Clearly, this was not the government’s view. Indeed, in 1958, President Dwight D. Eisenhower encouraged the American people to take matters into their own hands, issuing a National Shelter Policy that assumed that “every citizen was responsible for his or her own protection, and emphasized private shelter construction by homeowners.”³⁵

The government’s view began to change during the administration of President John F. Kennedy. Relations between the Soviet Union and the United States had deteriorated, and Kennedy agonized over the heavy burden of possibly having to participate in a nuclear war that

would devastate humanity. He stated as much in a 1961 speech to the American public. Referring to the development of atomic power, Kennedy stated that mankind had taken “into his mortal hands the power of self-extinction.... For of all the awesome responsibilities entrusted to this office, none is more somber to contemplate than the special statutory authority to employ nuclear arms in defense of our people and freedom.”³⁶ Kennedy’s landmark speech of July 25, 1961, delivered in the midst of the showdown with the Soviet Union over Berlin, was the flashpoint for increased interest in and discussion of a nationwide shelter program. Kennedy proposed a massive five-year bomb shelter program to provide protection for every American citizen. In his book *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture*, Kenneth Rose asserts, “Nothing previously had brought nuclear war into the homes of Americans in such a literal sense as Kennedy’s speech. Kennedy’s speech was an official enunciation of what was already a fait accompli: the American home had been put on the front lines of the Cold War.”³⁷ Spencer W. Weart, another expert on nuclear fear, puts it more bluntly: “Kennedy’s speech shocked the nation.”³⁸ According to authors Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, most Americans’ experience of the Cold War was a sense of the theoretically possibility of harm. But in Kennedy’s speech what had once been a distant possibility was suddenly very real and very close.”³⁹

Frank B. Ellis, Kennedy's Civil Defense Director, called for an "all-out drive for a nationwide system of shelters against radioactive fallout from nuclear attack. We've got to be able to survive any initial atomic attack." Kennedy's plan called for mandatory shelters to be included in any new school construction, and urged churches and charitable organizations to open their facilities as shelters and cafeteria.⁴⁰ Kennedy requested a tripling of the civil defense budget to help pay for this massive shelter program.⁴¹ After much haggling and debate,

however, Congress failed to allocate sufficient funds for the program. As a result, and lacking a sure-fire method of eliminating the effects of a possible nuclear strike, the United States government and its agencies settled on a hodge-podge of ideas and programs, gathered under the umbrella of civil defense, all aimed to possibly help reduce the damage caused by a nuclear bomb and educate the public of the looming danger. The onus for providing much of this protection was laid squarely on the backs of the American citizens. Kennedy himself penned a letter to *Life* magazine entitled “You Could Be Among the 97% to Survive If You Follow Advice in These Pages,” wherein he urged people to take steps to protect their families, including the construction and stocking of personal fallout shelters. According to Kennedy biographer Robert Dallek, Kennedy did not truly believe what he had written, and his science advisor Jerome Wiesner declared the article “grossly misleading.”⁴² Journalist and author William L. Shirer went further, complaining bitterly that the government had “passed the buck to the individual citizen. They have said in effect: every American family for itself and the devil take the hindmost.”⁴³

The palpable and growing military tension between the United States and the Soviet Union in the early 1960s continually stoked fears of war, and there was little doubt that such a war would result in a cataclysmic exchange of nuclear weapons between the superpowers. The resulting loss of life would be staggering, and according to Rose, “a broad range of Americans ... understood that a nuclear war would bring unprecedented horrors.”⁴⁴ People were nervous and anxious, and the subject of bomb shelters began dominating the news media and every day conversations. A *Time* magazine article from October 1961 declared, “At cocktail parties and P.T.A. meetings and family dinners, on buses and commuter trains and around office water coolers, talk turns to shelters.”⁴⁵

Tensions between the United States and Soviet Union reached their pinnacle in October 1962 with the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet Union had clandestinely constructed several nuclear missile sites on the island of Cuba, which is located only a short distance from the U.S. mainland. President Kennedy stated flatly that this would not be tolerated, and a showdown between the two superpowers seemed inevitable. U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk later declared this crisis to be “the most dangerous crisis the world has ever seen.”⁴⁶ The danger was real. According to authors Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “Had Lunas (a type of missile present in Cuba) been available to Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, who defended the Normandy coast of France from an Allied invasion in 1944, the Nazis would probably have been able to obliterate all five D-Day beachheads with no more than ten of these weapons.”⁴⁷ The devastation these missiles would cause if launched in battle or against the United States mainland was frightening.

The President’s brother and U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy commented that the crisis “brought the world to the abyss of nuclear destruction and the end of mankind.”⁴⁸ The weight of the crisis and the potential nuclear holocaust it could unleash was palpable, and had both a mental and physical effect on Kennedy. Dallek explains:

“The president’s tension was reflected in his appearance and physical movements. ‘This was the moment...which we hoped would never come,’ Bobby (Kennedy) wrote later. ‘The danger and concern that we all felt hung like a cloud over us all.... These few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the President. His hand went up to his face & covered his mouth and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust and had we done something wrong? ... I felt we were on the edge of a precipice and it was as if there were no way off.’”⁴⁹

The crisis was ultimately resolved peacefully when the U.S. and Soviet governments reached an acceptable compromise, but one of its effects of the crisis was the revelation of just how little

had been done in creating a viable and effective civil defense. In a letter to President Kennedy in the aftermath of the crisis, California Congressman Chester E. Holifield commented that the crisis had “brought vividly to mind the fact that the United States has no effective civil defense.”⁵⁰

Shaken by the crisis, the government, with the aid of the national and local media, launched a widespread yet often sporadic campaign to educate the public on how to protect themselves against a nuclear attack. The public – particularly women – were informed about how to prepare their home as a private bomb shelter, equipping it with food, water, clothing, first aid supplies, cleaning products and other necessities. This aspect of the program came to be known as “Grandma’s Pantry”, and used a heart-warming, feel-good advertisement campaign depicting a cozy country kitchen, complete with a pot-bellied stove. The soothing slogan assured the worried housewife, “With a well-stocked pantry you can be just as self sufficient as Grandma was. Add a first aid kit, flashlight, and a portable radio to this supply, and you will have taken the first important step in family preparedness.”⁵¹ The stark reality that the government failed to convey, however, was that Grandma never had to survive a nuclear attack and it was highly unlikely her daughter’s home would provide adequate protection, either.

The safety of the nation’s children was a major concern. Programs sprang-up across the country to teach children how to protect themselves against the harmful effects of a nuclear attack and the resulting radioactive fallout. “Drop and Duck” campaigns became part-and-parcel of many schools nationwide, with children being taught to hide under their desks and cover their heads with their hands. Fortunately, the dubious effectiveness of such tactics was never put to the test. Still, as Elaine Tyler May points out in *Homeward Bound*, “Simple measures such as these were attempts to reassure the public that they could protect themselves against nuclear

annihilation.”⁵² The effectiveness of such simplistic drills was widely questioned in the media and by public officials. A parody poster became a staple of college campuses, proclaiming: “Upon seeing the brilliant flash of a nuclear explosion, bend over and place your head firmly between your legs. Then kiss your ass goodbye.”⁵³

The issue was not cut-and-dried, and strong moral, ethical and practical questions arose. While at face value the construction of shelters seemed to be a logical defensive measure displaying American resolve in the face of an aggressive enemy, could it, as Kenneth Rose postulates, possibly be viewed by the Soviets as “a provocative action that would move the world closer to war?”⁵⁴ Could an effective shelter be constructed inexpensively, or were such shelters only affordable by the wealthy? And what of one’s neighbors? Did one’s family always come first? Would one be justified in killing his shelter-less neighbors if they tried to force their way into a person’s home shelter?

Such questions and dilemmas haunted the thoughts of the population, and contributed to the ultimate failure of the home shelter movement. According to Rose:

“Most Americans would ultimately reject shelter building for a number of very good reasons. First, shelters were expensive, and represented a considerable outlay for the average American family. Second, while the home shelter might be able to protect its occupants from fallout, it offered little protection from nuclear blast and heat. The urgency to build a shelter also decreased after the Berlin and Cuban crises had passed and tensions eased somewhat between the United States and Soviet Union. But the main reason Americans rejected shelter building had to do with the troubling moral aspects of shelters. These included questions of personal ethics and relationships with one’s neighbors, as well as questions of national identity and the ultimate morality of the kind of world that would be created by a nuclear exchange. Even if shelters did preserve the lives of those inside from the immediate ravages of nuclear war, what kind of life could the survivors expect when the bombs quit falling? Would such a life be worth living?”⁵⁵

Digging shelters into the ground and living like frightened moles was depicted by many to be un-American and un-patriotic. A pamphlet issued in 1961 by the Minuteman group succinctly stated this point:

“It is easy to see why most Americans have shied away from the government’s civil defense program. It is the American tradition to stand up and fight. It is not in keeping with this tradition to ask Americans to dig holes to hide in or to abandon their homes and flee helter-skelter to nowhere.”⁵⁶

In a 1961 *New York Times* article entitled, “How to be Evaporated in Style,” journalist James Reston complained that Kennedy’s July 25, 1961 Berlin speech and subsequent shelter proposals were haphazard and poorly planned. “If you start with speeches that scare the daylights out of people before you have a clear policy and the means of carrying it out,” declared Reston, “you are asking for trouble.”⁵⁷

As Rose indicated, the issue of home shelters faded quickly after the culmination of the Berlin and Cuban crises. By 1963, nearly all national and local efforts to encourage home shelter construction had ceased, and the issue faded into American folklore and history. Spencer Weart aptly described the swift collapse of public interest in civil defense, comparing it to a “child who lifts up a rock, sees something slimy underneath, and drops the rock back.”⁵⁸ Rose concluded, “What is clear is that at the height of Cold War tensions Americans *talked* a great deal about fallout shelters, but relatively few Americans actually *built* fallout shelters.”⁵⁹ Famed architect Robert Moses had predicted this very outcome when in 1957 he claimed Americans *en masse* would never support a fallout shelter program: “We are not going underground. We shall not evacuate and disperse. We shall not change our way of life. The sane people of the country will not take this threat seriously enough to support a fantastic national underground escapist program.”⁶⁰

The ultimate futility of life in a bomb shelter in the event of a nuclear holocaust was summed-up by singer-songwriter Thomas “Tom” Lehrer in his collection “Songs by Tom Lehrer”. Famous for his pithy and humorous songs, Lehrer often used irony to reflect reality. Lehrer wrote:

So long, Mom
I’m off to drop the bomb,
So don’t wait up for me,
But while you swelter
Down there in your shelter,
You can see me
On your T.V.
While we’re attacking frontally,
Watch Brinkally and Huntally,
Describing contrapuntally,
The cities we have lost.
No need for you to miss a minute
Of the agonizing holocaust.⁶¹

NEW ORLEANS: PROPHETS OF DOOM

The bomb explodes, lifting skyward a deadly gray mushroom cloud that dwarfs the city’s skyline and the new Mississippi River Bridge. At least 72,000 New Orleanians die. Another 40,700 lie injured. And a remaining 168,550 grope through rubble in frantic attempts to flee flames and poisonous dust bred by the terrible blast. New Orleans is a dead city. It will not be inhabited again for ten years, perhaps fifty.”⁶²

Such is the fate of New Orleans in a scenario envisioned by a Civil Defense test conducted in 1958. This projection is just one of dozens of hypothetical scenarios that recognized experts and scientific and governmental agencies released in attempts to predict the fate of the Crescent City in the event of a nuclear attack.

In 1951, Louisiana Emergency Welfare Services issued a fifty-six page manual estimating the human effects of a nuclear attack on the city. The report estimated that sixty-to-

ninety thousand people in the metropolitan area would perish, with a total casualty rate of double that amount. Fifty-to-two hundred thousand people would be left homeless and tens-of-thousands would require financial assistance simply to survive.⁶³ In a subsequent article one month later, Charles L. Wood, staff technical advisor for the Federal Civil Defense Administration in Washington, D.C., warned, “In the event of an enemy bombing attack, the casualty rate in congested zones of New Orleans would run as high as 50% if suitable shelter is not provided. This would be true even if New Orleanians had received warning of the attack.” There was some hope posed by Wood, however, as he claimed that “75% of the casualties from a bombing attack could be avoided if people are properly sheltered.”⁶⁴

As the bombs built by both the United States and the Soviet Union increased in destructive capacity, the casualty estimates climbed steadily. In early 1954, Brigadier General Robert V. Maraist, New Orleans Civil Defense Director, claimed that an atomic blast caused by a new hydrogen bomb in the center of New Orleans near the vicinity of Tulane and Loyola Avenues would kill one-hundred forty thousand people.⁶⁵ Even these staggering figures paled in comparison to the bleak predictions made in 1955 by National Civil Defense Administrator Val Peterson, who conjectured that a nuclear attack could doom many American cities, including New Orleans.

“It is extremely possible that some American cities, when bombed, could never be entered again. New Orleans is built on two or three feet of dirt resting on water. When you drop a bomb there, depending upon the site, you will create a crater a couple of hundred feet deep and a mile and a half across that will immediately become a lake regardless of what has been there previously. In addition to that, the tides they (New Orleans) will get may have an effect on the flow of the Mississippi river there. In addition to that, the persistence of radioactivity there may be so great that you won’t be able to go in there, not alone for days, but you may not be able to go in there for months and years, and you might have to write some of those places off.”⁶⁶

These horrific predictions grew worse with the development of the immensely more powerful hydrogen bomb. According to Civil Defense training specialist Stephen E. Koelz, a hydrogen bomb would "virtually destroy the entire city and much of its metropolitan area. An area roughly from two-to-three miles from the blast would receive gamma radiation which would essentially cause immediate death. The majority of the population in the area would suffer fatal burns."⁶⁷ Captain Robert Memory, a Civil Defense training officer in New Orleans, echoed Koelz's concerns, claiming there would be "complete destruction and complete loss of life in the five-mile blast area covering all of New Orleans Parish except a rim along the Lakefront and the area east of the Industrial Canal." He estimated that the blast crater would be one hundred seventy-five to two hundred fifty feet deep and three-quarters of a mile in diameter. The Mississippi River would overflow, completely flooding low-lying areas of the city. There would be severe blast damage everywhere within a twenty-mile radius of the burst. Offering a small dose of hope, Memory declared, "Some will survive and it is up to every citizen to work out a plan for himself and his family."⁶⁸ Memory's suggestions to improve one's chances for survival included remaining indoors and away from doors and windows, piling newspapers and books on a bed and crawling underneath, and changing clothes and showering if exposed to fallout.

There were also voices that dispelled the notion of a nuclear Armageddon. While not discounting that the damage and loss of life would be heavy, Dr. Frank B. Ellis, New Orleans Director of the national Office of Emergency Planning, was optimistic that many, if not most people would survive a nuclear attack. "More than one hundred million people could be exposed only to fallout and not to blast and fire," claimed Ellis. "These people could save their lives and build for posterity through the expenditure of only a small amount of money." He advocated the construction of home and community fallout shelters. He also hoped to derail a

defeatist attitude by appealing to American patriotism: "The doctors of doom who say that the whole world is going to be destroyed are not being very patriotic Americans."⁶⁹

NEW ORLEANS ASSESSES THE NUCLEAR THREAT

At the dawn of the nuclear age, New Orleans was considered of vital strategic importance to the United States. It was one of the largest ports in the nation, with a tremendous amount of cargo coming through the city's port. The city was high on any list of potential targets in the event of an enemy attack, and there was great fear that a "crippling blow to New Orleans would seriously disrupt the country's transportation system."⁷⁰

Initially, local officials did their best to reassure the city's population – and themselves – that the city was well prepared for an enemy attack and could withstand much of the impact and destruction of a nuclear explosion. Paul L. Ristroph, the local Civil Defense Director, declared, "The effect of shock on New Orleans from bombs or other disasters would be at a minimum compared with other United States cities."⁷¹ Mayor de Lesseps "Chep" Morrison cited numerous factors that would help the city survive a nuclear attack, including its geographic location and military defense systems already in place.⁷² However, as previously mentioned, U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff General Hoyt S. Vandenberg would later dispel any misconceptions about air defense systems being able to thwart an enemy attack, declaring "Seventy-five percent of the attacking planes would get through our defense system."⁷³

It did not take long, however, before officials began admitting that the city – as almost all urban communities in the United States – was woefully unprepared for a nuclear attack. Ristroph emphasized that the status quo was not acceptable. Concrete measures had to be taken if the city and its citizens were to be protected. "There is no such thing as relative safety," declared

Ristroph. “You are either safe or you are not.”⁷⁴ His recommended course of action was to prepare for mass evacuation of the city.

The task of preparing the city for a disaster – including an enemy nuclear attack – fell to the local Civil Defense authorities. The myriad of tasks and problems with which they were charged was daunting, but none had more urgency than preparing and protecting the city from a nuclear attack. “The basic purposes of Civil Defense,” stated James M. Bennett, assistant state director of Civil Defense, “are the reduction of civilian casualties and the maintenance of industrial production in the face of an enemy attack.”⁷⁵ According to Brigadier General Robert V. Maraist, “Development of a CD organization to maximum effectiveness would reduce the estimated casualties if warning was given by approximately fifty percent.”⁷⁶

These preparations involved the obvious ones: shelter, evacuation, medical contingencies, and the like. Early plans may have seemed logical at the time, particularly due to the city’s vulnerability to hurricanes. With the passage of time, however, many of these ideas now appear ludicrous. One such plan was to use area drainage canals as atomic bomb shelters. The city boasted sixty-seven miles of open canals and a further sixty-six miles which were covered. The theory was that these could be used as “protection from flash burns and radiation.”⁷⁷ Of course, these canals were essential in channeling the often heavy rainfall away from the city and keep the streets and homes dry. No satisfactory solution was ever devised to have the canal system function in both capacities. Further, open canals offered little protection from falling debris, which would be considerable in the event of a nuclear attack.

New Orleans geographical location – especially the high water table and the city’s perilously low elevation – presented unique problems. Underground shelters would be difficult and expensive to construct, and there would be the constant threat of water seepage and flooding.

This led Millard F. Caldwell, one of the early Civil Defense officials in the city, to propose above-ground bomb shelters.⁷⁸ Of course, in order to even hope to withstand the blast effects of a nuclear bomb, these shelters would require massive amounts of concrete and steel, as well as other reinforcing elements. The cost was prohibitive, so this plan was also discarded.

In addition to efforts being pursued by the government, individual citizens were encouraged to construct private shelters to protect their families. Robert V. Maraist, who served as New Orleans Civil Defense Director for much of the 1950s, implored the public to make adequate preparations, insisting that such efforts would actually deter the potential for war. "Help prevent World War III by letting Russia know each of us is aware of a Civil Defense survival plan," urged Maraist. "Let Russia know that each of us is preparing to live through an attack." Maraist's hope was for families to construct their own shelters: "While there is no protection in this area from blast, it is possible to protect ourselves from fallout by the construction of fallout shelters in or near our homes."⁷⁹

Forming the foundation of New Orleans' radiological defense system was to be teams of experts trained to handle first aid measures.⁸⁰ However, these preparations also encompassed many mundane, yet often essential requirements such as food supplies and materials, medical supplies, personal hygiene materials and facilities, and more. Often, these seemingly minor and insignificant tasks seemed to take precedence over more vital needs. For example, warehouses in the north shore community of Pontchatoula were reserved for the stockpiling of supplies, including over one million paper cups.

A nuclear attack was bound to leave much of the city and surrounding area in rubble, causing a breakdown of social services and governmental functions. Maintaining law and order in the face of such a disaster was a major concern, and it was fully expected that local law

enforcement agencies would be depleted and overwhelmed. A plan was put into action to recruit over a thousand volunteers to be trained as military police,⁸¹ while teams of neighborhood volunteers would be organized into fire-fighting brigades to fight the thousands of blazes that would result from a massive explosion.⁸²

Civil Defense planners included all segments of society in these preparations. Women were trained in all sorts of tasks, including basic medical skills and emergency care. They even became instructors in classes originally developed by a British women's group that taught participants how to make stoves out of rubble. "Talk of Civil Defense and the like quite often get no response from women," declared Edith Walker, director of emergency feeding for the British Ministry of Food. "But we find that when we talk to them about cooking and tell them that they must learn to cook for air raid victims, this has a practical appeal."⁸³ Mothers in neighboring Jefferson Parish were offered classes in basic medical care, including care for the sick and injured, delivering babies, and setting-up sanitary facilities. The hope was that women completing these classes would then teach other ladies in their neighborhoods and churches.⁸⁴

One of the main concerns of public officials was the safety of children, including students. An early effort to provide identification tags for all students listing their name, addresses blood types and next-of-kin met with wide public disdain and was quickly abandoned.⁸⁵ A further debate raged over whether students should be sent home, kept at their school, or evacuated in the event of an emergency. New Orleans Civil Defense Director Charles Erdmann, who assumed the office after the death of his predecessor Robert Maraist, expressed the belief that children should remain at school, claiming that the children would be safer at school as opposed to being en route to their homes at the time of an attack.⁸⁶ Erdmann issued a news release outlining the options for parents. In the release, he stated "If the attack should

come during school hours there is a decision which every parent must make. Do you want your child released by the school authorities for immediate return home? Or do you want your child left under the control of the school authorities for evacuation?"⁸⁷ In connection with the news release, students were given questionnaires that they were to bring to their parents for completion and returned to the school.

New Orleans schools participated in the national duck and cover drills, which were primarily aimed at protecting students from flying glass and falling objects. The first duck-and-cover drill held in the city was conducted at the all girls Sophie B. Wright High School in early 1951. Students were led to the school's basement, where they crouched under benches and ping pong tables or against the wall, covering their heads with their hands. School officials commented that the girls were somber and a bit of nervousness was evident.⁸⁸ A decade later, Warren Easton High School was the first school to offer a basic survival course as part of its curriculum.⁸⁹

Evacuations were also rehearsed. In 1959, two hundred students at Audubon Elementary were loaded onto buses and evacuated to the community of Mandeville on the north shore. An almost humorous series of events – bus breakdowns, late start and laughing children – marred the drill. St. Tammany Parish Civil Defense Director F. B. Eastman commented, "The children aren't old enough to realize what's going on, and I think it is better that way."⁹⁰

Proper advance warning was essential if the local population was to either find shelter or evacuate the city. In 1952, the city installed its first air raid sirens since World War II, with the first of sixty-seven sirens being erected atop a telephone poll on the corner of Decatur and Esplanade Streets. The air raid siren system was designed primarily for people residing in frame houses and those currently inside vehicles, as those inside large brick or concrete buildings were

thought to be unable to hear their wailings. Authorities advised folks living or working in these types of structures to install their own systems that could be linked to the city's network of sirens.⁹¹

Plans seemed to vacillate back-and-forth between numerous potential courses of action, including evacuation, bomb-proofing existing buildings, and the construction of bomb shelters. In 1959, evacuation of the city was still the main prescription of the city's civil defense plan, which stated: "In view of the fact that New Orleans is considered a Critical Target Area and that there is no protective shelter from the BLAST effect of hydrogen missiles and to the fact that we do not know where the Ground Zero (or Zeros) is (or are) going to be, it leaves New Orleans with one means of survival – and that is EVACUATION of the City, or the putting of distance between the population and the target area."⁹² The plan included specified evacuation routes and traffic control points, much of which was similar to the hurricane evacuation routes and plans the city had been using for years. Bomb shelters were not endorsed or planned, as civil defense authorities clearly felt such shelters were useless in the face of a direct hit:

"To withstand the BLAST effect of a hydrogen missile in the vicinity of the burst requires a structure that will withstand a pressure of 30 p.s.i.; or it has to be underground to a depth that is equivalent to some four feet of concrete plus five feet of dirt on top of that. The cost of such protection, especially in the New Orleans area, is prohibitive. Therefore, we must accept the fact that in the New Orleans area, when we speak of shelter from the BLAST effect for the population – it is non-existent."⁹³

However, the plan did endorse the construction or designation of official "Fallout" shelters, which were designed to protect people from the effects of radioactive fallout from a nuclear blast. Still, citizens were cautioned that these shelters would not protect against a nuclear blast, and the best course of action was to evacuate.

A few years earlier, underground bomb shelters were urged by Mayor Morrison, with a massive shelter and parking garage suggested beneath Lafayette Square. As proposed, the shelter would be built to a depth of twenty-four feet and provide space for 34,000 people and 1,200 vehicles.⁹⁴ The plan faced opposition, with fears being expressed of water seepage due to the city's water table and propensity for flooding. Morrison was resolute, insisting that underground shelters would be safe from such flooding. The plan ultimately faded into obscurity, and the shelter was never constructed.

The costs for launching a massive underground shelter construction project proved to be prohibitive. So, the city ultimately opted to designate existing buildings as official fallout shelters. The first such shelter was located in a "huge four-story, steel-reinforced concrete building" at the New Orleans Port of Embarkation. It was recommended that the top two floors of the building be left vacant to "serve as a buffer zone to absorb much of the shock wave and radiation from an atomic blast."⁹⁵ The shelter was designed to accommodate six thousand people from the surrounding neighborhoods.

In 1960, work was begun to refurbish the basement of City Hall so it could serve as a shelter. Cots, medical supplies, concentrated food supplies, Geiger counters and other necessary supplies and equipment were stocked and installed. The space could accommodate six hundred people for up to two weeks. The hope was that the shelter would serve as a model for area businesses.⁹⁶

Enlisting the assistance and cooperation of area business was an arduous task, but the network of community fallout shelters would eventually expand to over forty locations within the city limits and dozens more in surrounding parishes. Most of these shelters were located beneath or in area office, government and retail buildings. The city had to acquire permission

from the owners of these buildings, which were required to meet minimum fallout protection standards. Each of these buildings was marked with "Fallout Shelter" signs, and the city assumed the responsibility of equipping the buildings with food, water and other necessary supplies. (See Appendix IV) The locating, designating and stocking of shelters was a slow process, and many citizens complained that since no building had been designated in their area, they felt neglected and overlooked. In a 1962 special bulletin to city newspaper editors and civil defense program directors, Mayor Victor Schiro attempted to answer these concerns, stating that the forty-two buildings designated as official fallout shelters – most of which were concentrated in the central business district -- had been selected based on “the nature of their construction. They offer a radiation protection factor that satisfies federal government standards without structural modifications of any kind.” He further emphasized that buildings in other areas of the parish did not qualify, stating that “architects and engineers could not sanction as official shelters simply because they did not meet the standards set down by the federal government to qualify as shelters.” Schiro cited New Orleans Civil Defense Director Erdmann in the bulletin: “This does not mean that every building cannot provide some degree of protection against fallout.”⁹⁷ Most of the buildings were not stocked with supplies months after their designation, and only eight public schools were found suitable for use as shelters.⁹⁸ In spite of these concerns, New Orleans was ahead of most cities in terms of action being taken. For a city that usually has the dubious distinction of lagging behind the rest of the nation, New Orleans received notice from federal Civil Defense officials as being at the forefront of the protection of its citizens and the city.⁹⁹ The tireless Charles Erdmann was not satisfied, however, declaring that the Civil Defense program “is in no way completed. It will not be completed until every person in New Orleans is provided with some kind of government recognized fallout shelter.”¹⁰⁰

When it became clear that federal funding for massive shelter campaigns would not be forthcoming, much of the responsibility for preparing for a nuclear attack and its aftermath was shifted to individuals and families. While the city did establish a network of shelters for most of its citizens, individuals were still urged to take steps to protect themselves and their families. The New Orleans Civil Defense office wholeheartedly endorsed the concept of home shelters, claiming they "may be built for little more than the cost of the annual insurance premium on a car."¹⁰¹

The public was fed a steady diet of brochures, pamphlets, articles, training courses and even public drills informing of steps that could be taken to protect against a nuclear attack. A citywide Civil Defense Awareness Week was held in late 1961. Included in the campaign was a city-wide sounding of the air raid sirens on Pearl Harbor Day – December 7 – at which point all taxi drivers were to stop and ask their passengers a series of questions, including:

- "If this were a nuclear attack, do I know what to do?"
- "If I know what to do, am I prepared to do it?"
- "If not, how can I prepare myself?"

Louis Cuccia, Co-Chairman of the event, directed the following comment to all citizens of the city: "As officials remind you that the bomb hovers over mankind and the world could go crazy in a short period of time because of nuclear attack, this seems an appropriate time to



Figure 1: The Times Picayune, December 7, 1961

remind citizens that a missile is probably aimed this way. The thing could go off. People should be prepared."¹⁰²

In 1961 at the height of public awareness of the potential for a nuclear attack, Willard F. Libby, a university professor in Berkeley, California and Consultant to the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, authored a fifteen-part series of articles on surviving a nuclear attack that was published in newspapers throughout the country. The series was aimed at a national audience and was published locally in the *New Orleans States-Item* newspaper. The series concentrated on the steps individuals and families could take to protect themselves against a nuclear attack. According to Libby, "The key to survival is understanding the hazards, the effects of nuclear weapons, so you can make intelligent decisions and take intelligent action."¹⁰³ Libby hoped to dispel many of the common myths and misconceptions that were widespread. Among these was the defeatist attitude that there was no defense against a nuclear attack and constructing a home shelter would be a waste of money. Early in the series, Libby flatly predicted, "Ninety to ninety-five percent of us survive, with proper protection."

Libby provided plans for the construction of an inexpensive home shelter costing as little as thirty dollars. This shelter was constructed of burlap bags and railroad ties. He even went so far as to suggest stacking books over and around a table in order to provide some protection. Libby readily admitted that such shelters were no good against a blast, but could protect against fallout.¹⁰⁴ This mantra was repeated often by enthusiastic entrepreneurs, who were eager to cash-in on what was hoped would be a shelter-building craze. A December 28, 1960 letter to Mayor Schiro from the Mooney Equipment Company emphasized the same point: "The Office of Civil Defense Mobilization recommends that every family in the United States, regardless of location (whether in a potential target area or hundreds of miles away), have a suitable,

approved, Fallout Shelter. Why a Fallout Shelter? Why not a shelter that will give complete protection from a direct hydrogen-bomb hit? The answer is simple: There is no such protection.”¹⁰⁵ Libby’s recommendation that families equip their basements as shelters failed to resonate with most New Orleanians, as very few homes in the area contained basements due to the high water table in the city, most of which is located below sea-level.

Early on, officials and experts were claiming that families would only have to remain in their shelters for forty-eight hours. However, as a better understanding was gained of the various hazards posed by nuclear fallout and radiation, these estimates were extended to two weeks or more. So what should one stock in a home shelter? That answer varied considerably, as numerous lists were published from different sources. Water, canned and/or concentrated food, eating utensils, garbage containers, sanitation facilities (including human waste disposal containers), tools, first aid kit and a Geiger counter were nearly universally recommended. Libby even suggested sleeping pills, admitting that a lengthy stay in such dark and confined quarters could prove boring and stressful.¹⁰⁶ (See Appendix V)

Unlike several other countries – most notably Switzerland – the United States did not require shelters to be part of new construction. In Switzerland, since the early 1960s, the law has required that nearly all new buildings be outfitted with a suitable shelter. According to articles 45 and 46 of the Swiss Federal Law on Civil Protection, “Every inhabitant must have a protected place that can be reached from his place of residence.” Further, “Apartment block owners are required to construct and fit out shelters in all new buildings.”¹⁰⁷ Norway and Finland have similar requirements. The forward-thinking New Orleans Civil Defense Director Robert Maraist espoused just such a program in an undated inter-governmental memo: “It would seem an

excellent idea to require all new construction work to provide adequate shelter facilities, certainly schools, hospitals, public buildings, etc., in which Federal funds are involved.”¹⁰⁸

No public funds or tax incentives were offered for the construction of private shelters. A federal loan program was established, but the loan had to be repaid in seven years and the shelter had to meet stringent government guidelines in order to qualify. The shelter needed to provide twenty-five square feet of useable floor area for every bedroom in the owner's residence, and it had to have proper ventilation. Plans for the shelter had to be submitted in advance, and the lender's bank had to inspect the shelter during the construction process to insure it continued to meet federal guidelines. The program never caught-on, and the entire home shelter movement floundered. Most people seemed to realize that in order to have any chance at effectiveness, a sturdy underground shelter would be required. The cost of constructing such a shelter was beyond the reach of the average New Orleanian. There was an uptick in interest during the Berlin Crisis in 1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis in late 1962, with thousands of inquiries for information being made to the Civil Defense office in City Hall. New Orleans Civil Defense Director Charles W. Erdmann bitterly complained about the lack of proper funding: "Appropriations are sadly inadequate and the public is inadequately prepared and informed. I only hope that when the situation (Cuban Missile Crisis) is resolved, there will be no abatement in interest in individual survival."¹⁰⁹ Interest did decline, and people quickly turned their attention to other matters.

Just how many home shelters were actually constructed in the New Orleans area is unknown, as no official records were kept. As late as December 1961, Gretna mayor William J. White visited a home fallout shelter constructed at the home of A.J. Scardino, commenting that it was only the second shelter known to exist in the entire parish of Jefferson. New Orleans was

not experiencing much more success. Officials planning for a network of community shelters in the city lamented that only a handful of New Orleans families had constructed fallout shelters.¹¹⁰ Suffice to say, the number of shelters actually constructed in the metropolitan area was extremely small.

One such shelter was constructed by Clifford H. Cadis at his suburban home in Metairie. Cadis was a bomber pilot in World War II, flying over fifty successful missions. He saw first-hand the destruction that could be caused by conventional bombs and

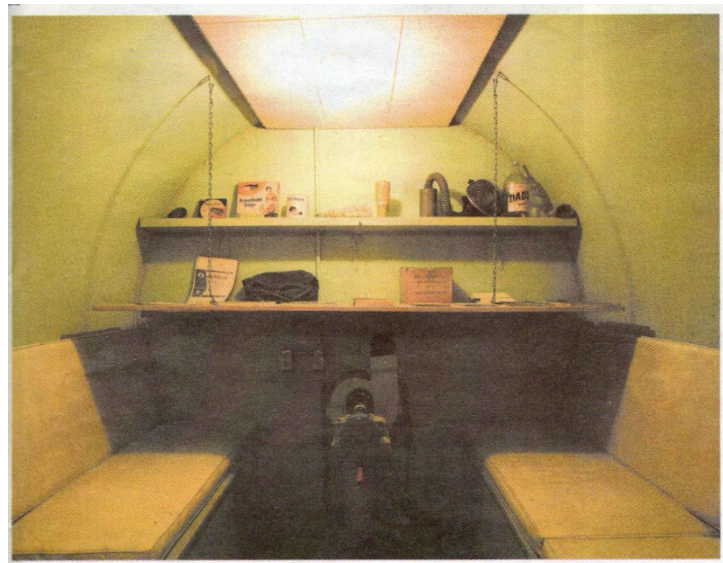


Figure 2: Fallout Shelter in Metairie

was fully aware of the devastation that could be wreaked by nuclear weapons. “I wanted to protect myself and my family,” Cadis declared¹¹¹. In 1962, he constructed a large, tube-like fallout shelter beneath his home, burying the structure nearly ten feet beneath the surface. The structure was buffered by twenty tons of concrete, and was designed to protect against nuclear radiation and fallout. The shelter was equipped with food, water, cleaning supplies and other materials, including a Geiger counter and radiation ventilated mask. There was a ventilation system that filtered out radioactive particles and allowed fresh air to flow through the shelter. In a pinch, the shelter could accommodate nine people. Neighbors were amused when the shelter was being constructed, and the only time it was used was during Hurricane Betsy, which struck the city in 1965. While Cadis no longer lives in the home, the shelter remains intact and contains most of the original items (See

Appendix VI). Cadis proved a rarity, as most New Orleanians opted not to construct private shelters.

While convincing citizens to construct personal home bomb shelters proved to be largely an impossible task, the city did construct a large Civil Defense Control Center between Pontchartrain Boulevard and West End Boulevard near Lake Pontchartrain. Planning for the shelter began in the late 1950s, with construction commencing in the early 1960s. The half-million dollar facility was completed in little over a year. According to CD Director Charles Erdmann, "The center was built to give the city's government a secure base from which to operate during both natural and man-made disasters. If New Orleans ever comes under nuclear attack, it will insure continuity of government while the city is rebuilding."¹¹² The two-story round structure was constructed underground, with four feet of dirt piled atop for both added protection and to prevent it from popping out of the ground due to the water table. To better protect it from any blast effects, the operations center was constructed fourteen feet below ground. Even so, the structure would only remain intact if a nuclear explosion occurred three or more miles away.¹¹³

A myriad of steps were taken to insure that the facility would remain operational in the event of a nuclear attack. While it was serviced by city utilities, emergency generators insured uninterrupted power in the event services were cut. Sewer lines, water lines, and electrical wiring were all exposed, allowing for immediate repair.

The center could accommodate nearly three hundred city officials and civil defense volunteers for up to two weeks. Operations were on the lower level, while sleeping facilities were provided on the top level. Due to the shelter's proximity to Lake Pontchartrain and the resulting possibility of flooding during a hurricane, the entrance to the shelter was fourteen feet

above sea level, which is estimated to be the highest point in the New Orleans area. While the shelter was utilized during hurricanes, it was never needed for enemy attacks. Maintenance on the shelter ceased during the 1970s, and it has been abandoned for decades.¹¹⁴ It remains a ruin, a testimony to a by-gone era of intense nuclear fear, particularly amongst those charged with protecting the city. (See Appendix II and III)



Figure 3: Civil Defense Command Center, Lakefront

PUBLIC OPINION AND THE NUCLEAR THREAT

“What? Me worry?”¹¹⁵

During the first two decades of the nuclear era, scores of public opinion polls were conducted by various groups and government agencies, all dealing with topics related to nuclear weapons, Civil Defense, radioactive fallout, or public fear and/or anxiety over the possibility of nuclear war. I will try to present a good cross-representation of these surveys and their results.

The vast majority of the polls were conducted between 1945 and 1950. Each subsequent five-year period indicated a dramatic drop in the number of polls concentrating on nuclear related issues. Whether this is an indication of the declining interest of the general public in such matters is open for debate, but since pollsters tend to conduct surveys on topics that are of importance to the general public at a certain period in time, this would likely be a reasonable conclusion.

A National Opinion Research Poll (NORP) conducted in September 1945, not long after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, asked the question: “If there is another world war, about how much danger do you think there’ll be of most city people on earth being killed by atomic bombs: a very real danger, only a slight danger, or no danger at all?” The results were overwhelming. 83% of the respondents felt there was a ‘real danger,’ while another 10% felt there was a slight danger. Only 3% felt there was no danger, while 4% held no opinion.¹¹⁶ A similar poll was taken ten years later, asking virtually the same question, but the subject being a hydrogen bomb as opposed to an atomic bomb. Even in consideration of this immensely more powerful bomb, only 27% of the respondents felt that all mankind would be destroyed.¹¹⁷

A related poll conducted by *Fortune Magazine* in January 1947 asked the question, “Would you say it is likely or unlikely that a large American city will be atom-bombed in the next ten years?” The percentage that responded “Yes, Bombs Likely” was much smaller, with only 22% of the respondents fearing such an occurrence. This probably reflects the fact that the Soviet Union had not yet developed an atomic bomb. Once the Soviets developed the bomb in 1949, these figures changed drastically. An American Institute of Public Opinion (AIPO) poll

conducted in August 1950 asked, “Do you think Russia would use the atom bomb on American cities or not?” A staggering 91% answered “Yes, Bombs Likely.”¹¹⁸

Unlike many perils in life, the danger of being the victim of an atomic bomb attack was viewed by a large percentage of the American public as something more likely to happen to someone else. When asked the question in a 1954 AIPO survey, “In case of another world war, how much chance do you think there is of your community (city) being attacked with atom bombs?” over 57% of the respondents felt there was “Some” or “Great” danger. However, folks were a bit more optimistic about their chances of surviving such an occurrence. A 1963 AIPO survey asked, “If we should happen to get into an all-out nuclear war, what do you think your own chances would be of living through it?” 52% of the respondents felt their chances were ‘very good’.¹¹⁹ This may reflect a waning of nuclear fear as the Berlin and Cuban crises faded into the past.

Were people actually thinking about the possibility of nuclear war, as many experts, journalists and the national media claimed? A June 1950 AIPO survey confirmed that they were, indeed, thinking about the possibility. More than half of the respondents answered in the affirmative to the question, “Have you, yourself, ever given any thought at all as to whether you and your family would be in possible danger from a bomb attack in case of another war?” Somewhat surprisingly, a sizeable 33% claimed never to have thought about such a possibility.¹²⁰

A majority of Americans were thinking about the danger of a nuclear attack, yet few were taking concrete steps to mitigate the danger or reduce the chances of being injured. The same survey asked a follow-up question of the 58% who had given some thought to the possibility of

nuclear attack, “What steps do you think you might take to avoid danger?” The results were less than encouraging to civil defense planners:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Move to country; get away from industrial areas | 10% |
| Go to air raid shelters or basements; build shelters | 9% |
| Organize now to meet danger | 2% |
| Miscellaneous | 8% |
| Nothing can be done; sit and wait | 12% |
| Don’t know | 17% |

Given the extensive campaign encouraging American families to construct home bomb shelters, one would believe that the percentage of Americans who had given consideration to constructing a home shelter would be fairly large. However, an AIPO survey conducted in June 1960 fails to confirm this assumption. When asked, “Have you given any thought to building a home bomb shelter,” 21% answered ‘yes’ while a shocking large 79% answered ‘no’. When the question was modified to “Suppose that a home bomb shelter could be built for under \$500. Would you be interested in paying to have one built for you and your family, or not?” the percentage responding ‘yes’ did rise to 38%, but was still well below 50% of the respondents.¹²¹ According to the surveys, there just did not seem to be the overwhelming public interest in Kennedy’s shelter program that some experts have claimed. Indeed, in a 1963 study conducted by Gene N. Levine and John Modell, both researchers at Columbia University, Americans were asked to rank eight Civil Defense programs in order of importance. Only two percent of the respondents ranked fallout shelters as the most important of the alternatives presented them.¹²²

Furthermore, there did not seem to be the widespread pessimism about a nuclear holocaust authors and scholars insist permeated society during that era, at least not in the early 1950’s. A June 1950 AIPO survey asked, “Some people say that if another world war comes, it would mean the end of mankind. Do you agree or disagree?” A staggering 67% of the

respondents disagreed with this assertion, a figure that rose to 84% if the respondent was college educated.¹²³ Other surveys seem to confirm the results that the more education an individual had obtained, the less likely he was to live in fear of a nuclear attack. Eugene J. Rosi, a former instructor of government at Columbia University, drew the conclusion that “The more informed and attentive public was evidently less worried.”¹²⁴ In the conclusion of his article “Mass and Attentive Opinion on Nuclear Weapons Tests and Fallout, 1954 – 1963,” Rosi declares, “Education was the most significant variable: the amount of anxiety was directly inverse to the level of education.” He continues that “The public seemed far from hysterical over fallout at this time, and still less so in November 1961 ... Increased knowledge about fallout apparently produced a decrease of anxiety about all its effects.”¹²⁵

There are a variety of possible conclusions to be drawn from these and the numerous other surveys I have studied on this subject matter. Taken as a whole, however, it is possible to state that the studies did confirm that majority of American people were cognizant of the potential threat of a nuclear attack and its destructive effects. However, it appears that the majority of Americans were not deeply worried about such a potentiality and few had taken any concrete steps to mitigate the effects of such an assault. The public opinion surveys conducted in that era do provide occasional glimpses of some anxiety, but give little indication of an atmosphere of mass hysteria running rampant in American society during the 1950s and early 1960s.

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS: NUCLEAR FEAR IN NEW ORLEANS

But inevitably, other concerns and interests had reasserted themselves. Awesome in prospect, the atomic threat was simply less immediate than one's job, one's family, the cost of living, even the reviving rhythms of domestic politics and foreign affairs. There were distinct limits on

people's capacity to sustain interest in any issue – even atomic war – “not intimately a part of their personal day-to-day preoccupations”¹²⁶

The true test of assessing the presence and magnitude of nuclear fear in New Orleans is to talk with people who lived in the city during the first two decades of the nuclear era about their remembrances of living life under the shadow of the bomb. Such personal testimony of those with first-hand experience with these times would prove invaluable. These testimonies should help to confirm or refute the thesis of hysteria or near panic over the potentiality of a nuclear attack running rampant in American life, particularly in New Orleans.

Over a dozen interviews were conducted with individuals ranging in age from 58 to 88 years of age. In the 1950s and 1960s, these people would have been either teen-agers or young adults with their own families. The interviewees represented a fair cross-section of society, with occupations ranging from housewife to oil company executive to military personnel.

During the course of the interviews, I asked each person six specific questions, encouraging them to expand upon their answers and relate personal stories. A full list of these questions appears in Appendix I of this paper. The questions concentrated on any fear or anxiety the subjects may have experienced due to the potential threat of a nuclear attack, as well as any steps or precautions they or their families may have taken to mitigate the effects of such an attack. Often, follow-up questions were asked to clarify their statements or to encourage them to provide more detailed information.

The majority of the individuals interviewed did recall discussing the issue of the atomic bomb with their families, but not always with their children. Discussions with children were usually not in-depth and were conducted in such a fashion as to not instill fear or anxiety in their children. Dick Shoemaker, a member of the famed Red Ball Express during World War II and a

professional sign painter, stated that he “downplayed all of the troubles” in discussions with his family.¹²⁷ Barbara Becker Bailey, an engineer and later a housewife, placed a large part of the blame for any anxiety and fear in children on government agencies and the media: “I think they tell children to be afraid rather than tell them everything is going to be alright. For children, you need to tell them that someone is going to take care of them.”¹²⁸ Conversations between adults tended to be a bit more detailed and speculative, but still did not occur under the pall of doom or dread. What Ms. Bailey attributes to fear-mongering, however, could actually be the government’s responsibility to educate and warn the public.

A few of the individuals who were children at the time recalled the ‘duck and cover’ drills that were taught at their local schools. Robert W. McKey, Jr., a school-aged child during this period, remembers “teachers pulling down the shades” and children being taught “to get underneath our desks. We would climb up underneath them for a short period of time and they would sound off on the school P.A. system a wailing sound warning of an attack.” Such drills did not affect him, however, as he claimed: “There was no fear or anxiety. It was treated seriously, but as children, we treated it as a game.”¹²⁹ Jessie Lindsley recalls her daughter Charmaine also participating in such drills and coming home afraid. Her son, however, was not affected at all by such civil defense precautions.¹³⁰

To be sure, everyone recalled being aware of the potential nuclear threat, but only a few admitted to having experienced any episodes of fear or anxiety. Barbara Pouwels, a housewife, was pregnant with her second child when the Cuban Missile crisis erupted. She recalls sitting in the waiting room of her doctor’s office thinking “It was going to happen. Here I am pregnant and I was worried how bad it was going to be.”¹³¹ Others claimed that they personally were not overly worried, but noticed such fear in others. Harold Meaker, a geologist and engineer with

Texaco Oil Company, tells the story of a co-worker who, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis, “took his family hundreds of miles outside of New Orleans because he was so concerned about the city being a target.”¹³²

One individual interviewed, however, claimed that fear and anxiety was rampant. George H. White, Jr. was a United States Post Office employee for most of his adult life and at the end of his career from 1978 to 1982 he was the radiological defense officer for his district. His duties were to organize local post offices and facilities against the possibility of a nuclear attack, a responsibility that may have somewhat biased his reactions and comments. When asked if he felt a persistent fear or anxiety regarding the possibility of a nuclear attack, his answer was succinct:

“Definitely. I had it. Most people had it. Most people tried to hide or disguise it. It was all over. It was in conversations; it was at universities; it was in churches; it was in shopping centers – wherever people congregated, it was the topic of conversation. We were scared to death.

There was always a foreboding kind of feeling somewhere in the background. No matter what you did, you still thought that this could happen at any time.

There was not a lot of moping, crying or whining – people did what they had to do. The anxiety still took its toll somehow – the divorce rate, the crime rate, young people drinking a lot. Like, “What’s the use? Why should I give a damn about my health, because when the ‘big bang’ comes, it’s all over anyway.”¹³³

In my interview sample, however, George’s view was the exception. Without exception, every other individual interviewed claimed that the fear and anxiety level was extremely low or even non-existent. The more representative comments were numerous: “We weren’t afraid of any nuclear attack,” claimed Gay Miller Meaker, an elementary school teacher.¹³⁴ “I don’t recall any real fear of it. I never did worry about it,” stated Robert McKey, Jr.¹³⁵ “I just lived one day to the next. I didn’t let it bother me,” declared Bertha Flettrich, also a school teacher.¹³⁶ “I don’t remember having any anxiety about the bomb falling on us,” stated Barbara Becker Bailey.¹³⁷

Kenneth Pouwels, Sr, a contractor, expressed a similar sentiment: “We weren’t concerned about the atomic bomb.”¹³⁸ Annell McGee, a Speech-language pathologist, declared: “I don’t remember having any particular concern. I was more concerned with my own life.”¹³⁹

Prior to drawing my conclusions, it is worth noting that for most of the people interviewed, the defining historical moment of their lives was World War II. That event proved so momentous and made such a tremendous impact upon their lives that everything of a historical nature that occurred afterwards seemed to pale in comparison. This fact, coupled with the passage of time, which tends to dull the emotional impact of a particular event or occurrence, could have had an effect on the subject’s remembrances of their emotional state and anxiety levels during this critical period in time. This, however, is a question best addressed by professionals trained in the health social sciences.

CONCLUSIONS

No doubt, many people did experience fear and anxiety over the possibility of a nuclear attack. In his detailed study *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*, author and historian Spencer R. Weart cites several instances, including one of a woman who recalled that as an elementary student, “she was sometimes frightened at night if she heard an airplane drone overhead and would sit up begging, ‘Please don’t let them drop the bomb on me.’”¹⁴⁰ Most people, however, buried such fears if they experienced them, tucking them away in the far recesses of their mind. With the passage of time, they were forgotten.

Can one draw realistic conclusions from such a limited series of sample interviews? Perhaps not, but taken in context with other scholarly research, public opinion polls and related

data, a picture begins to emerge that is in contrast to the theories put forth by several historians and authors who claim that a widespread current of fear, caused primarily by the threat of a potential nuclear attack, ran just below the surface of American culture. According to these authors, this fear had a profound effect on the individual psyche and American culture and was blamed for a wide variety of social ills, including a high divorce rate, juvenile delinquency and widespread psychological ailments. Based on my limited research the evidence simply does not support their arguments as it pertains to the New Orleans area.

Certainly governmental officials and nuclear scientists were more keenly aware of the threat and the potential devastation that could be caused. This intimate knowledge of current events and world affairs no doubt heightened their sense of alarm, much of which was conveyed in their interviews, articles and speeches. However, some of this information was no doubt withheld from the public for numerous reasons, including national security and the fear of inciting panic and depression in the general public.

There did exist some concern and occasional anxiety in the general public, particularly in times of international crises. However, the vast majority of people simply learned to live with this fear. As Rose points out, “Clearly, Americans were anxious about such a world, but they were forced to learn to live with their anxieties about the bomb in the same way people live with other traumas of life.”¹⁴¹ Life went on and most Americans were far more concerned with raising families, providing financial and emotional support, advancing in their careers and “keeping up with the Joneses”. Living one’s life was more important and urgent than worrying about a potential nuclear attack. As Daniel Lang put forth in the *New Yorker*, Americans took an approach concerning a potential nuclear holocaust of “simply refusing to think about it”.¹⁴²

This attitude is likely more pronounced in the New Orleans area, where people lived under the annual threat of hurricanes. People were regularly bombarded with warnings of the potential devastation these storms could cause, and were reminded repeatedly of the preparations that should be made. A certain degree of numbness develops, as living life under a constant state of fear and apprehension is unacceptable and intolerable to most people. In such circumstances, many, if not most people opt to push the fear to the back of their minds and simply get on with their lives. This is exactly the attitude that was expressed in the vast majority of the sample interviews conducted.

The United Artists motion picture *On the Beach*, a film that depicted a world in the process of being destroyed by the aftermath of a nuclear war, emphasized this message:

There *is* hope.

There *has to be* hope.

There is *always* hope.¹⁴³

Such a message of hope, which was lost in the film's ultimate outcome, appears to have resonated strongly within the American psyche as the vast majority of the public did, indeed, learn to live with the bomb and proceed to live productive, quality lives not encumbered with an overburdening fear and anxiety of nuclear holocaust and the end of the world. Most people simply did not allow themselves to be pulled into the dark hole of nuclear anxiety.

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¹¹⁶ Hazel Gaudet Erskine, "The Polls: Atomic Weapons and Nuclear Energy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* vol. 27, no. 2 (1963): 156.

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- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 162
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 157
- ¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 158.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 159.
- ¹²¹ Ibid., p. 160.
- ¹²² Gene Levine and John Modell, "American Public Opinion and the Fallout-Shelter Issue," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1965): 271.
- ¹²³ Ibid., p. 162.
- ¹²⁴ Eugene J. Rosi, "Mass and Attentive Opinion on Nuclear Weapons Tests and Fallout, 1954 – 1963," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 2 (1965): 287.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 291 – 292.
- ¹²⁶ Boyer, *By The Bombs Early Light*, p. 293.
- ¹²⁷ Interview with Dick Shoemaker, March 1, 2003.
- ¹²⁸ Interview with Barbara Becker Bailey, March 1, 2003.
- ¹²⁹ Interview with Robert W. McKey, Jr., March 1, 2003.
- ¹³⁰ Interview with Jessie Lindsley, March 12, 2003.
- ¹³¹ Interview with Barbara Pouwels, February 27, 2003.
- ¹³² Interview with Harold Meaker, March 1, 2003.
- ¹³³ Interview with George H. White, Jr., March 18, 2003.
- ¹³⁴ Interview with Gay Miller Meaker, March 1, 2003.
- ¹³⁵ Interview with Robert W. McKey, Jr., March 1, 2003.
- ¹³⁶ Interview with Bertha Flettridge, March 6, 2003.
- ¹³⁷ Interview with Barbara Becker Bailey, March 1, 2003.
- ¹³⁸ Interview with Kenneth Pouwels, Sr., February 27, 2003.
- ¹³⁹ Interview with Annell McGee, March 1, 2003.
- ¹⁴⁰ Weart, *Nuclear Fear*, p. 133.
- ¹⁴¹ Rose, *One Nation Underground*, p. 212.
- ¹⁴² Lang, "A Reporter at Large", *New Yorker*, November 16, 1946, cited in Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light*, p. 282.

¹⁴³ Stanley Kramer, *On the Beach*, United Artists 1962. Adapted from the novel of the same name by Nevil Shute (New York, 1983; originally published 1957).

APPENDIX I

THE BOMB IN THE BAYOU INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What discussions did your family have concerning the threat of the atomic bomb?
- 2) Was there a persistent fear or anxiety concerning the possibility of an atomic attack within your family?
- 3) What specific actions, if any, did your family and/or school take as precautions to help deal with the possibility of a nuclear attack? What counseling services, if any, did your school provide to deal with students' fears of a nuclear attack?
- 4) Did the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 somehow heighten your or your family's fear of a potential nuclear attack on the United States? If so, how did you deal with this increased fear?
- 5) How do you feel that your life was somehow affected or hindered by the persistent threat of a nuclear attack against the United States?
- 6) What are your most vivid memories of the effects on your life by growing-up under the threat of a nuclear war?

APPENDIX II

New Orleans Civil Defense Command Center Lakefront Area

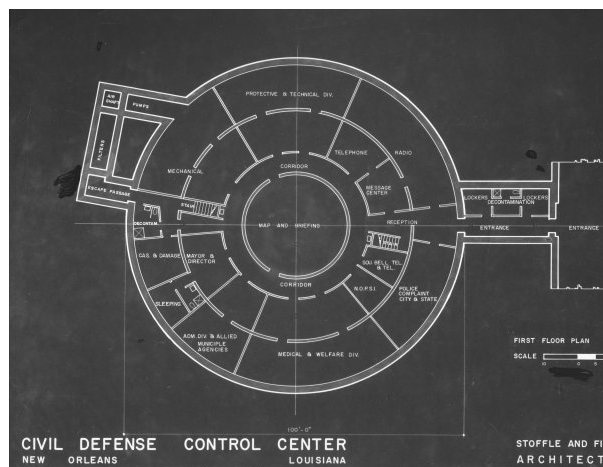


Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Plans for Civil Defense Control Center

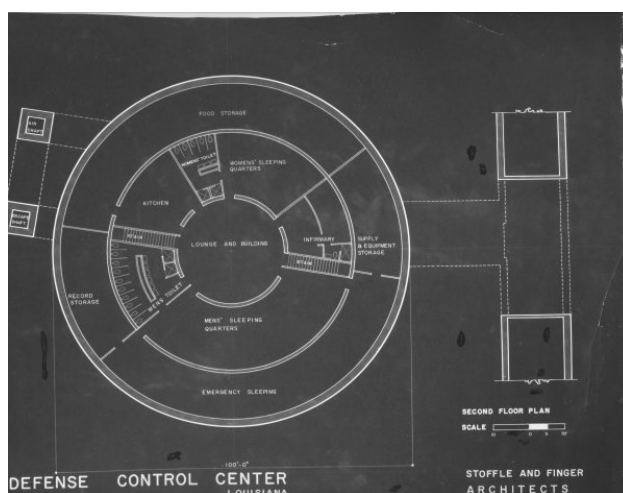


Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Plans for Civil Defense Control Center

Source: New Orleans Office of Civil Defense Photographs, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

APPENDIX III

New Orleans Civil Defense Control Center Lakefront Area



Figure Error! Main Document Only.: Interior of Civil Defense Control Center

Source: New Orleans Office of Civil Defense Photographs, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library.

APPENDIX IV

Designation of Official Fallout Shelter



--Photo by The Times-Picayune.

MAYOR SCHIRO PLACES SHELTER SIGN
Civil Defense marker put up on Saratoga building.

Source: *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, October 30, 1962, 12.

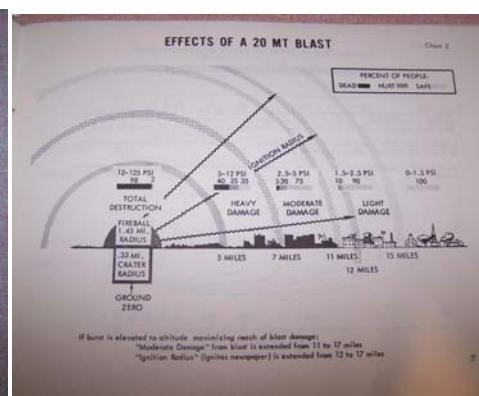
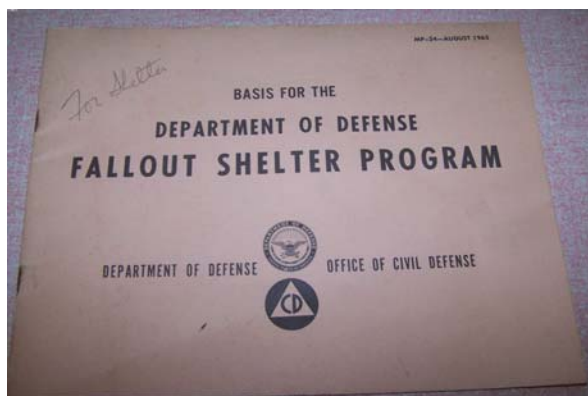
Fallout Shelter Supply List



APPENDIX VI

Fallout Shelter in Metairie, Louisiana





Source: Photos, Greg J. Schloesser

APPENDIX VII

Abridged Evacuation Plan and Map

NEW ORLEANS METROPOLITAN AREA ABRIDGED BASIC EVACUATION PLAN

While the destructive effect of thermo-nuclear bombing cannot be over-emphasized, at the same time, it would be utterly stupid to say there is "no use" in taking precautions against its destructive power. ANY PROTECTION is better than none.

Warning Sirens: 1. If surprise attack, warning sirens will sound warbling or intermittent wail from 3 to 5 minutes. Wherever you are TAKE COVER. Get into, behind, or under the best shelter you can quickly find.

2. If time permits an ALERT signal is given. This is a steady sound from the siren. Get home and turn your radio on CONELRAD - 1240 on your dial and listen for instructions. If time permits and an evacuation is ordered, turn over to the map on the other side of this sheet. Find out what section of the city you are in and follow the route out of town shown by the arrows.

Schools: Each school in the City has an evacuation plan. As prearranged by parents, children will either be sent home or evacuated by the school teachers.

There will be Reception Areas prepared to receive and take care of you to which you will be directed by Traffic Control posts.

Fall-out: This is the depositing upon the earth of radiation - emitting particles from the cloud which arises from an atomic or thermo-nuclear explosion. Fall-out can be fatal and yet it may be practically harmless depending on concentration and length of time of exposure. Prevailing winds at great altitude determine the direction of fall-out, not surface winds. Civil Defense Radiological Teams will determine the amount of radiation in your area and will inform you over CONELRAD.

Strategic Evacuation: If the international situation should deteriorate to the point where the Civil Defense Director concludes that an evacuation of non-essential people (children, women, sick, elderly) is prudent he will so advise the responsible head of the city government. This would be a precautionary evacuation and would make an emergency evacuation, of those left, easier to accomplish.

Survival: If the city is subjected to actual bombing, as could easily be by submarine lurking in the Gulf of Mexico, it may be some time before anyone is allowed to re-enter the city; certainly not until fires are extinguished, utilities re-established and the city is radiologically clear. You will be better able to survive if you can take care of yourself for 2 or 3 days. Have your shelter supplies in an easily transportable container packed with first aid supplies, canned food, and water. Some of the items which will help you survive are: fruit juices, soups, milk, coffee or tea, canned meat and fish, baby food, raisins, chocolate, packaged cereals, and dried foods.

Hospitals and other institutions must each make their detailed plans for the evacuation of their patients and personnel. This will be done in conformance with the State over-all Survival Plan.

Signals & Action: 1. "ALERT" signal. (Steady blast of 3 to 5 minutes on siren) Get home - turn radio to 1240 CONELRAD. Prepare to evacuate - be ready to take food, first aid kit, etc. - the order to evacuate will come over CONELRAD. UPON ORDER TO EVACUATE put your family evacuation plan into effect - get on the nearest evacuation route and follow traffic control instructions. OBEY YOUR POLICE AND CIVIL DEFENSE INSTRUCTIONS. 2. "TAKE COVER" signal (Warbling or intermittent 3 to 5 minutes on siren) Get into your home shelter immediately shut all doors and windows. Take cover in basement or on first floor. If outside, seek the best cover immediately available. Stay put until you find out that area is clear of fall-out.

EACH INDIVIDUAL & EACH FAMILY SHOULD HAVE A DISASTER PLAN.

In New Orleans Area, while we fully recognize the importance of shelter, we feel that for the great proportion of our people, evacuation will prove our chief salvation. This is our Basic Plan. The instructions herein are sound - they are a part of the over-all State-wide plan. Take this BASIC PLAN as your GUIDE and GOSPEL.


* * * * *

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR:

Dear Citizen:

Read this pamphlet very carefully. It may save your life and the lives of your loved ones. After you have read it, keep it in a safe place for future reference, if needed.

Very truly yours,


Victor H. Schiro, Mayor

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VITA

Gregory J. Schloesser was born on November 27, 1961 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Upon graduation from Archbishop Shaw High School in Marrero in 1979, he matriculated at Loyola University in New Orleans where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminal Justice in 1983. In 1984, he entered the insurance business, spending nearly eleven years with Prudential Insurance Company. In 1995, he opened an independent insurance office, which he continues to operate to the present time. He has resided in East Tennessee since June of 2005. He returned to academia in 2001, enrolling in pursuit of a Master's Degree in History from the University of New Orleans.