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Mobilizing for World War III: U.S. Film Propaganda

In the United States (U.S.), both popular culture and cultural studies generally treat civil defense films of the 1950s and early 1960s as objects of camp and comical derision. In its time, however, civil defense was regarded by national security planners as an indispensable element of the domestic underpinning of nuclear deterrence.¹ Forestalling a Soviet nuclear attack by threatening to respond in kind depended on the credibility of the threat. Under what conditions could Soviet leaders be convinced of the authenticity of U.S. declarations? Only if they believed that the U.S. was willing to accept the consequences of the failure of deterrence – the nuclear destruction of U.S. cities. In an apparent paradox, nuclear deterrence could be expected to succeed only if the Soviets had reason to think the U.S. was prepared to risk its failure. However, Americans would find the risks of nuclear war tolerable only if they could be convinced that a Soviet strike would not spell utter disaster. Minimally, it was necessary for Americans to believe that they could survive a nuclear attack and, following post-attack reconstruction, resume their pre-attack lives. The civil defense programs of the early Cold War represented an attempt to produce this conviction by persuading the public that they could acquire the disciplines and skills that would enable them to survive and thrive in a post-attack world. Film and television propaganda, which Arnold Ringstad calls the rhetoric of civil defense, was a critical weapon in the homefront theater of the Cold War.

¹ See Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety About the Atom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Andrew D. Grossman, *Neither Dead Nor Red: Civil Defense and American Political Development During the Early Cold War* (London: Routledge, 2001); Dee Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon: Why Civil Defense Never Worked* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Early civil defense films were made by private production companies, some with distribution channels. As a result, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) was able to vet and approve distribution of films even though the agency lacked federal funding for a film program (100-101). Ringstad notes that when the FCDA was reorganized as the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization (OCDM) in 1958, the business model for film production shifted to private sponsorship. Film companies produced the films, and the OCDM provided expertise. Costs were covered by companies or industry associations with an interest in civil defense (104). In the private sector, civil defense seemed to hold promise as a growth industry. Home fallout shelters would increase demand in the building construction industry. The importance of fireproofing, assembling personal or residential nuclear survival kits, preserving records, and ensuring delivery of safe water would provide opportunities for other businesses – just as, post-9/11, state security agendas have generated opportunities for firms specializing in counterterrorism.

In light of Ringstad's proposal to investigate "the evolving rhetoric" of civil defense films, his method is somewhat surprising (93). Instead of exploring the development of civil defense films and tracing changes in their rhetorical stances, he selects two phases of civil defense propaganda: its beginning in the early 1950s and its final phase in the early 1960s. His tactic is to examine "representative" films from both periods in order to compare their differences. It is these differences that he characterizes as an evolution in rhetoric (94). His entries from the early period include titles such as *You Can Beat the Atomic Bomb* (1950), *Our Cities Must Fight* (1952), and *Duck and Cover* (1952), the animated feature for children with its famous star Burt the Turtle, whose anatomy, if not his listless habitus, conformed nicely to civil defense propaganda of the time. From the later period, when civil defense planners stressed the dangers of radioactive fallout and the immense destruction produced by thermonuclear weapons, Ringstad considers *Walt Builds a Family Fallout Shelter* (1960), *Funnels and Mushrooms* (produced between 1957 and 1961), and *Radiological Defense* (1961).

He finds four chief differences in the films of these periods, most notably (1) The somewhat histrionic anti-Communism of the first films disappeared by the early 1960s, when the OCDM commissioned films designed exclusively to train American households in survival techniques; (2) Early films made pervasive use of "the conventionalization argument."² On the logic of this argument, if the effects of two threats are fundamentally the same, they can be managed by employing essentially the same methods. The conventionalization argument held that the effects of a nuclear attack would not differ fundamentally from the consequences of the massive Allied bombing raids on German and Japanese cities in World War II. Therefore, nuclear attacks could be managed by conventional methods. The tactics needed to protect Americans in the event of a Soviet nuclear strike would not differ substantially from the methods that served Londoners during the Blitz of 1940-1941. Ringstad claims that this argument was deleted from the films of his later period. However, he adds the proviso that the dangers posed by a nuclear attack often became embedded in the routines of everyday life. The result? The nuclear threat was "still tied closely to the 'conventional'" (112). Ringstad calls this close tie – which he characterizes as a "modified

² A concept that, as he notes, Ringstad draws from Oakes, 1994.

method of conventionalization” – “integration” (112); (3) The films of the two periods differed stylistically. Early films were dramatic narratives, comparable to the scripts of movies or television series in which characters engage in dialogue and develop story lines. This style was dropped in later films, which employed the documentary reportage of newsreels and a script read by an omniscient narrator; (4) Early films represented nuclear war in a frivolous and often inaccurate and irresponsible fashion, bracketing its real dangers and horrors. Not so the later films, in which humor and imprecision were replaced by “realistic, accurate, and practical information” (121).

This is not the occasion for a full consideration of Ringstad’s four theses, assessment of which would require more space than his article. Two points, however, may be apropos in this brief review.

First, confirmation of the claim that later films provided a realistic picture of the social world of nuclear attack is a formidable undertaking. During this phase of civil defense propaganda, the OCDM sponsored a series of fifteen-minute television programs called “Retrospect” that were broadcast by CBS. The host was Douglas Edwards, known to millions of Americans as the man who read the CBS evening news. “Retrospect” was perhaps the most concerted effort by the OCDM to represent the post-attack world as an ensemble of challenges that could be analyzed as manageable problems, resolvable by simple methods that required neither heroism nor technical expertise. The set of “Retrospect” included a mock-up of a concrete block fallout shelter furnished with bunk beds and stocked with canned goods and bottled water, portable cooking equipment, a radio, and other survival gear that home-protection manuals recommended as necessary and sufficient to sustain not only life but comfort in the two weeks of isolation that would be mandatory following a Soviet nuclear strike. But what would be the fate of the family when it emerged from entombment to confront the post-attack world? “Retrospect” presupposed that the U.S. polity and economy would remain in place, even if not operating at pre-attack levels of efficiency. Survivors could assume that the transportation and communications network of the country would continue to function. Municipal water sources would supply families with uncontaminated water. The pre-attack organizational apparatus of law enforcement would remain intact, in which case public fears of widespread civil disorder could be dismissed. These assumptions rested on the premise that the personnel required to perform essential tasks of recovery and reconstruction would survive. The unit of strategic analysis used in “Retrospect” was a nuclear strike on a single city, ignoring U.S. national security planning that assumed a quick succession of strikes on scores of cities in which hundreds of bombs would explode – destroying power grids, food and water supplies, transportation and communication infrastructures, killing or disabling millions, and contaminating much of the country for years. On the benign premises of “Retrospect,” post-attack life, much like pre-attack life, would be largely privatized – centered on the home, which the family could decontaminate without undue difficulty. In the nuclear physics of “Retrospect,” radioactive fallout was a form of ordinary household dust, which could be removed by using standard housecleaning

methods, readily available cleansers, and the addition of a new household appliance – the Geiger counter.³

The “Retrospect” series, which Ringstad does not consider, trivialized the challenges that would confront the post-attack family and embellished its prospects. “Retrospect” propaganda as articulated by CBS newsmen and OCDM on-camera experts also cast doubt on Ringstad’s other main theses. In constructing its panglossian image of the post-attack world, “Retrospect” made repeated use of the conventionalization argument. Edwards’ stern warnings of the threat of nuclear war were laced with conventional anti-Communist and anti-Soviet rhetoric of the day. In some segments, the documentary style of the news broadcast was replaced in favor of human interest stories featuring conversations between CBS newsmen and American families who were fighting the Cold War on the homefront by employing favored OCDM tactics. The fifth installment featured a chat between Edwards and a couple from Topeka, Kansas, Mr. and Mrs. Brown, who had spent seven days in their home shelter together with their eight children. As Mr. Brown held an infant and the other children frolicked in the CBS fallout shelter, the couple related the story of their underground experience to the television audience. In the fourth installment, a CBS newsman visited the farm of a Great Plainsman and determined civil defender. His story: the construction of an elaborate shelter for his family, to which he had added an underground fallout-proof barn that would accommodate four head of cattle, two horses, and feed.

Second, a few concluding remarks on the conventionalization argument. Early civil defense films blurred the differences between conventional and nuclear weapons. Later films highlighted them, lending special emphasis to the dangers of fallout. However, this shift in the conception of nuclear weapons did not touch the central premise of the conventionalization argument: the claim that a nuclear attack could be survived by following elementary protocols, employing skills that could be easily mastered and incorporated into everyday routines, and relying on the do-it-yourself pragmatism and technological rationality that civil defense propagandists represented as innate qualities of the American character. The chief implication of this premise was to conventionalize nuclear war by breaking down the stark dichotomy of normality and nuclear crisis. The prospect of nuclear attack was normalized by arguing that the tactics of mastering it were extensions of familiar techniques that defined the workaday lives of American middle class householders. If U.S. citizens followed the pre-attack rules and acquired the skills recommended in civil defense films, they could expect a smooth if challenging transition from pre-attack to post-attack life. Ringstad seems to admit as much in his remarks on the lessons of later civil defense films: although nuclear weapons posed new dangers, “precautions against the nuclear threat [could] be meshed with the practicalities of ordinary life” (113). This consideration suggests that his concept of integration as a “modified method of conventionalization” is a distinction without a difference.

³ In 1960, only fifty-three percent of U.S. families owned their own homes. See *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 1960-61* (28) at www.bis.gov/opub/uscs/1960-61.pdf, accessed 18 March, 2013. Thus OCDM propaganda, which concentrated on the importance of building and maintaining home shelters, left almost half the U.S. population to fend for themselves in the post-attack world of firestorms and radioactive fallout.

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