

The fallout shelter illustrates the pervasive fear of nuclear attack and its aftermath in the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. This particular unit—a freestanding, double-hulled steel structure—was installed beneath the front yard of Mr. and Mrs. Murland E. Anderson of Fort Wayne, Indiana. The residents of Fort Wayne were concerned that they might become targets due to the large number of military industrial sites in the region. They, like thousands of other American families, sought ways to protect themselves from a potential nuclear catastrophe.

The American public's experience with nuclear warfare began at the end of World War II. Initial public reaction in the United States and Europe to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 was extremely positive, as the use of nuclear weaponry was believed to have expedited the surrender of Japan and spared Allied lives. Footage of the cities immediately after bombing remained classified for decades for fear of alienating public opinion. However, as uncensored reports emerged, the public realized the unimaginable human suffering caused by the bombs, and fear of this newfound capacity for man-made destruction began to outweigh celebration. Among the most notable postattack accounts of the bombings were Wilfred Burchett's dispatches in the *Daily Express* and John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, published in the *New Yorker* on the first anniversary of the bombings in 1946.

When the Soviets successfully detonated their first nuclear weapon on August 29, 1949, at the Semipalatinsk Test Site in present-day Kazakhstan, it was widely interpreted as a warning that the United States was now vulnerable to nuclear attack. Further driving American fears was an increasing awareness of the horrific aftereffects of radiation exposure. The dangers of being exposed to highly radioactive postexplosion particles called fallout, was becoming known—or at least widely rumored. Popular culture responded to this new, widespread fear; in 1954, the film *Godzilla*, featuring a monster born from the effects of the nuclear warfare in Japan, found a widespread audience.

During the cold war, the possibility of nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers loomed large in the public imagination to an extent that is today difficult to imagine. A national emergency warning alarm system (NEAR—National Emergency Alarm Repeater), based on the air-raid siren warning system of World War II, was implemented in the United States in 1956. In 1963, it was succeeded by the Emergency Broadcast System, a distinctive warning signal to be played on all radio and television stations in the event of a nuclear attack (euphemistically termed “an actual emergency”). But nuclear warfare posed the new challenge of avoiding not only the blast itself but the fallout afterward.

Governments in the United States and Europe quietly designated reinforced underground bunkers as safe retreats for high-ranking officials in

FALLOUT SHELTER

AMERICANS
TRY TO COPE
WITH THE
UNCERTAINTY
OF THE COLD
WAR AND THE
PROSPECT OF
A NUCLEAR
ATTACK.

*National Museum of
American History*

Read
first,
then
answer
the
questions
on your
own
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complete
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→ case

of nuclear attack while assuring the population at large that there was no danger. In the United States, the luxury Greenbrier Resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, 248 miles from Washington, D.C., was outfitted in 1958 with an elaborate underground facility to house high-ranking federal officials for several months in the event of an attack. The Federal Civilian Defense Administration (FCDA) distributed information broadly on how to survive a nuclear attack. Existing public buildings with sturdy basements were designated as civilian fallout shelters, marked with a distinctive yellow and black symbol, and films were distributed to schools, where children practiced federally mandated, and in actuality pointless, "duck and cover" drills. In September 1961, the U.S. government announced the Community Fallout Shelter Program, publicized by a letter from President Kennedy published in *Life* magazine.

In response to popular demand, the FCDA also published plans for how people could build their own fallout shelters, endorsing the idea that Americans could survive nuclear war, one family at a time. In the Midwest, there was already a tradition of residential basement storm cellars, which existed to shelter families from tornadoes. Individuals in other parts of the country soon latched on to this idea, updating their shelters with heavy concrete or lead linings to protect against radiation, and stocking them with the recommended supplies, including seven gallons of water per person (half a gallon per day), nonperishable food, receptacles for human waste, a first-aid kit, a flashlight, and a battery-operated radio for news of the outside world.

The Andersons maintained their fallout shelter from 1955 through the 1960s. They bought it from a Fort Wayne realtor who sold fallout shelters as a side business. Installation proved problematic. It was not adequately anchored against Fort Wayne's high water table, and in 1961 the shelter popped to the surface of the Andersons' front yard just in time for the Cuban missile crisis. That event precipitated a frenzy of shelter-building activity, and the Andersons' unit was quickly reinterred. In 1968, Vera Howey purchased the property, including the shelter, from the Andersons. By 1989, the Howeys were tired of the attention the shelter attracted and contacted the Smithsonian to see if the museum was interested in its acquisition. Curator William L. Bird was. He believed the fallout shelter was "a key

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of Cold War domesticity reflecting the vision of civilian life in the atomic age between Presidents Truman and Kennedy." He and a group of colleagues had the shelter exhumed and brought to the Smithsonian. For exhibition purposes, a window was cut in the side, the deteriorated bolts were replaced, and the shelter was stocked with the kinds of provisions one might have found in 1950s Indiana. It continues to remind museum visitors of the pervasive anxiety of the cold war era caused by the looming threat of annihilation.

Questions:

1. Describe the purpose of a fallout shelter in detail.
2. What other ways did our government teach people to survive a nuclear attack?

3. If you were in a fallout shelter in the 1950s, describe what you might see.