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Children and the Cold War: Race & Hypocrisy Amid Fear of Nuclear War

by

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the United States and Soviet Union found themselves the most powerful capitalist and communist nations, respectively, and as ideologically opposed global superpowers. They soon became engaged in what author George Orwell called the Cold War.¹ As both were armed with nuclear weapons, the conflict became only more fraught. Yet, one of the areas that the superpowers sought to achieve supremacy over each other was in the arena of childhood. By the 1950s, the quality of a person's childhood came to be perceived as being directly connected to a nation's strength, and so both superpowers engaged in relentless propaganda, targeting children, or to be more precise, foregrounding how their nation's children fared under each superpower. For American children in the immediate postwar period, the constant drumbeat of outside threats, combined with propaganda about the opportunities and virtues of American citizenship, left them with feelings of profound fear and contradiction. These points only became more pronounced as the Cold War wore on.

The American public simultaneously held the belief that the United States was wholly just and unassailable all while the nation remained in constant danger of attack by outside forces. The pressure created by this contradiction trickled down through the nuclear family and to America's children, causing many of them to suppress whatever anxieties they may have had about their personal futures in order to fulfill their perceived proper roles as future citizens.²

¹ George Orwell, "You and the Atom Bomb," *Tribune*, October 19, 1945.

² Michael Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and American Youth: Coming of Age with the Atom, 1945-1955* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003), 23.

During World War II, teenagers helped support the war effort by selling War Stamps, and assisted in other ways by joining civic organizations, such as the Junior Red Cross, though they still tried to live as close to normal lives as possible. For these teenagers, normalcy took the form of “slumber parties, dates, boyfriends, and the latest fads and fashion.”³ Even within a few days of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some children had incorporated nuclear bombings into the “wargames” they played. An August 18, 1945 *New Yorker* article revealed this. A seven- or eight- year- old “military man” in Washington Square Park “explained the changed situation” by stating that he “[was] an atomic bomb, [and] he just [went] boom,” right before jumping off a seesaw and running off.⁴

By the 1950s, the atomic bomb became a central weapon of the Cold War. Against the looming presence of a nuclear threat, authorities aimed a new wave of intense and pervasive American propaganda at American children intended to prepare them for the realities of life in a nuclear world. Children faced a relentless bombardment of messages about the dangers of a nuclear attack from a callous foe, the Soviet Union. By the end of the 1950s, 60% of children would report having nightmares that were in some way related to nuclear war.⁵ Yet, during the 1950s, the forthcoming “attack,” that is, a literal attack on American children, did not come from the outside, but from within and against a particular segment of American youth: Black children.

³ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴ John McCarten, “Adjustment,” *New Yorker*, August 18, 1945, 17.

⁵ Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 137.

American Propaganda & Making Young Cold Warriors

American children in the 1950s did not experience childhoods devoid of worry. They faced a steady bombardment of political and cultural messages that introduced them to the politics of the Cold War and nuclear warfare. As a consequence, children of all ages became more and more aware by the day of just how rapidly and dangerously the world was changing around them.

By comparison, some of the Soviet Union's propaganda during the late 1940s and early 1950s focused on arguing that Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin was able to protect Russian children from American attack. One of the most prominent examples of this took place during Stalin's seventieth birthday party in 1949, at which the Soviet Academy of Sciences declared him to be the "first defender of youth and world peace." At the same event, 2,000 members of the Soviet youth organization known as the Pioneers, which involved children from nine to fifteen years' old, organized a ball thanking Stalin "for [their] happy childhood."⁶ Russian propaganda promoted children as a reflection of Stalin's benevolence towards the Soviet people, which the government framed as part of a larger national family under communism.⁷ Despite American propaganda having a similar focus on the family and the maintenance of the status quo against an outside foe, it did not try to counter the USSR with its own vision of a "strongman" mythos. It instead concentrated on the inferiority of socialism to capitalism and the perceived greater

⁶ Margaret Peacock, *Innocent Weapons: The American and Soviet Politics of Children in the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

freedoms capitalist countries gave their citizens. And one of those freedoms centered on the greater material well-being of American children.⁸

Indeed, American children were central to the country's anti-communist struggle. While many American children attempted to suppress their fears out of a desire to maintain as "normal" a life as possible, this did not mean that they turned a blind eye to the world around them. Some students turned to the United Nations to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons. One 1945 poll sponsored by the magazine *Senior Scholastic*, stated that 58% of American students opposed sharing the knowledge to create atomic weapons with other nations.⁹ This negative view of nuclear proliferation was shared by Americans in general. Fifty-four percent of those interviewed for a Gallup poll the following year expressed the opinion that the world would be better off with every nation's military under the control of the United Nations, including that of the United States, a major contrast to the nationalistic sentiments prevalent in American propaganda that positioned the United States as the world's police force.¹⁰

For children who grew up near Los Alamos, New Mexico, the site of the first atomic tests, they were even more directly affected by the rise of atomic power. For example, the Los Alamos graduating class of 1952 had photographs of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory alongside student pictures in the school yearbook, and the 1954 yearbook had as its cover a picture of an atomic explosion. The latter featured a statement from the director of the

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁹ Scheibach, *American Narratives and American Youth*, 30-31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

laboratory that the mushroom cloud was a symbol known to even “the smallest schoolchild,” and that nuclear physics was changing textbooks and the trajectory of students’ lives. For example, in December 1945, the children of atomic scientists in Oak Ridge, Tennessee created the Youth Council on the Atomic Crisis, dedicated to figuring out peaceful ways of using atomic energy. This was in response to a visiting physicist to their school, who claimed that in the case of nuclear war, “one out of three students in [their] auditorium [would] die from atomic blasts.”¹¹

The mood of children in general changed following the start of the Korean War in 1950, as the concept of a hypothetical war, involving atomic weapons became the premise of an actual war that could go nuclear. Newspaper obituaries reported the deaths of both teachers and former students who had been called up to serve, and military recruiters increased their efforts to attract high school students following their graduation. Students created exhibits on the Korean War and signed documents, such as the “Freedom Scrolls,” that affirmed their commitment to defending American values, especially individual freedom and civil liberties.¹² The text of the Freedom Scrolls read, for instance:

In the belief that freedom is the most precious of human rights, I gladly sign my name to this Freedom Scroll as evidence of my participation as a free citizen In the Crusade for Freedom, supporting the National Committee for a Free Europe and its striking arm, Radio Free Europe. In so doing, I join hands with millions of other Americans in bringing *truth* and *hope* to the courageous freedom-hungry people behind the Iron Curtain.¹³

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Ibid., 80.

¹³ Crusade for Freedom, “Truth vs. Lies: Freedom Scroll,” advertisement, *Lima News*, February 19, 1954, 12.

Since these scrolls were part of the greater “Crusade for Freedom” propaganda campaign that secretly served to fund the anti-communist radio station, “Radio Free Europe,” under the guise of private enterprise, children’s role in signing them were seen as a crucial part of the country’s greater ideological effort against communism during the 1950s.

Another form of propaganda used by the Children’s Crusade during the Korean War were the *Children’s Crusade against Communism* trading cards, printed by the Bowman Gum Company in 1951, and sold with their gum. Bowman Gum was no stranger to depicting war, having already released a similar trading card set known as *Horrors of War* in 1938. This collection depicted events and people involved in the Second Sino-Japanese War, Second Italo-Ethiopian War, and the Spanish Civil War. The 1951 collection was primarily meant for a child audience, but it also came with a pamphlet instructing them to tell their parents to read the Department of State’s bulletin if they were interested in knowing more about the conditions within communist states.¹⁴ Here, parents and children were to work together in honing their patriotism and opposition to communism.

According to a Bowman spokesperson who spoke with the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper, the company was not particularly interested in “messages.” Instead, they felt that it was important for the cards to interest children because the content was “good for them” in

¹⁴ “Slave Labor,” 1951, GLC09627.03, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards*; 3, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

order to know the difference between capitalist and communist ways of life.¹⁵ In a way very similar to the Freedom Scroll oath, the very back of the card box featured a pledge that read:

I believe in God, and the God-given freedom of man. I believe in the United States of America and the United Nations. I believe in government of the people, by the people and for the people . . . I am against any system which enslaves man and makes them merely tools of the State. I pray that they may be delivered from oppression. I pledge my faith, loyalty and devotion to the cause of freedom for all mankind.¹⁶

Before a child could even open the card box, they were inundated with propaganda that positioned the United States as a God-fearing, justice-loving nation, diametrically opposed to the “godless,” authoritarian communist states, the company argued. This reflected the political zeitgeist of the time, for the same year the card set was released, the Knights of Columbus began a campaign that ended with “under God” being added to the US Pledge of Allegiance in 1954. The organization thought this would further the image of America as a nation centered on God, and therefore one opposed to communism.¹⁷

The cards each carried a particular theme and had a simple format, with one side displaying artwork related to the Korean War, and the other side providing some brief information. These cards gave an overview of the battlefronts where communism was being fought at the time, while also teaching children patriotism and to fear the idea of communism ever reaching the United States. For instance, one card, titled “Ghost City,” depicted an artist’s imagination of the ruins of an American city after an atomic bombing. With its skyscrapers

¹⁵ “An Ideological Aspect of Bubble-gum,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 1951.

¹⁶ “Rare 1951 Bowman ‘Red Menace’ Five-Cent Display Box,” n.d., <https://www.pricerealized.com/#!/Item/737431/Rare-1951-Bowman-Red-Menace-Five-Cent-Display-Box>.

¹⁷ Harriette Kevill-Davies, “Children Crusading against Communism: Mobilizing Boys as Citizen Soldiers in the Early Cold War State,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21 (2018): 246.

destroyed and streets deserted, "Death" itself looked over the scene from the clouds above.¹⁸

While the United States would prefer to work through the United Nations to promote peace, the card stated, an America that could defend itself (implicitly referring to its own nuclear arsenal) made any attack unlikely.¹⁹

Card #19 carried the title of "Atomic Doom." It depicted a family hiding under the rubble of a ruined house in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear attack. The card's most prominent subjects were a mushroom cloud illuminating the night sky, and what appears to be a father holding his daughter to his chest as he forlornly surveys the devastation. The card claimed that this dreaded fate was indeed a possibility if Soviet bombers managed to get past American defenses. Of course, the best way to prevent that kind of future was to add more political, economic, and military power to the United Nations and to the United States.²⁰

There were also efforts to depict communists, particularly non-white ones, as duplicitous, and to a degree, inhuman. One card, depicting Chinese Communist Party chairman Mao Zedong, gave him green skin while describing him as a "war-maker," who delighted in causing bloodshed. This constructed an enemy that children should be prepared to help fight.²¹ Behind his portrait was a red background with a screaming ape, wielding a bloody machete.

¹⁸ "Ghost City," 1951, GLC09706, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism* trading cards; 23, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ "Atomic Doom," 1951, GLC09627.19, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism* trading cards; 19, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

²¹ "War-Maker," 1951, GLC09627.47, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism* trading cards; 47, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

This hearkened to a form of anti-Asian caricatures used to frame the Japanese during World War II. This was now redeployed to represent the communist Chinese and North Koreans.²² Notably, Mao is the only communist leader depicted in the entire set, and an inhuman-looking one, as well. This directly contrasts to how American leaders were depicted. One card showed U.S. Chief of Staff, General “Lightning Joe” Collins, for instance, a hero of both the Second World War’s European and Pacific fronts, as an honorable “soldier’s soldier,” who was integral in keeping the “Red Menace” at bay.²³

Many of the “Red Menace”-themed cards depicted non-white communist rebels as not only cowardly for their guerilla tactics of sabotage and ambush, but a threat that ultimately impeded the forces of anti-communism.²⁴ This category included the Huks in the Philippines, echoing American views of the Muslim Moro rebellions during the Philippine-American War decades before, and the Viet Minh guerillas, fighting the French for independence in the First Indochina War. The cards often depicted the North Koreans as not only “cowardly,” but also dishonorable, as was the case with the fifth card in the set, “Hill 303.” This card depicted North Korean soldiers massacring UN prisoners at the titular hill before running away at the sight of UN forces. The card stated that “civilized” nations must give prisoners of war “fair treatment,” and that the UN would “respect their rights under international law,” even if the North Koreans

²² Harriette Kevill-Davies, “Children Crusading against Communism: Mobilizing Boys as Citizen Soldiers in the Early Cold War State,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 253-4.

²³ “‘Lightning Joe’ Collins,” 1951, GLC09627.38, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards*; 38, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

²⁴ Harriette Kevill-Davies, “Children Crusading against Communism: Mobilizing Boys as Citizen Soldiers in the Early Cold War State,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 258.

would not do the same.²⁵ The very first card in the *Children's Crusades Against Communism* set depicted the Korean War as a conflict where the North Koreans attacked a South Korea whose leaders were "chosen in free elections."²⁶

This statement is ironic, but a clear indication of propaganda. South Korean President Syngman Rhee was indeed elected, but he was chosen by selected electors rather than the general populace.²⁷ Next, he consolidated power by suppressing dissidents and even committing massacres against those he considered supporters of communism, both during and after the war. In this way, he was not too dissimilar from the Kim regime in the north. The card, titled "Police State," described communist nations as places "where no one is free to debate what is good for [their] country," and argued that American children were important to preventing communists from doing the same in the United States.²⁸ For the people of South Korea during the 1950s, however, they lived under a capitalist, rather than communist, system. But this regime was an illiberal democratic government, nearing a dictatorial police state where its people's freedoms were curtailed.

Other cards had more grim subject matter, considering their youthful audience. "Visit by Red Police" and other cards showed Soviet repression with secret police arresting families, or in

²⁵ "Hill 303," 1951, GLC09627.05.01, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards*; 5, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

²⁶ "Reds Invade South Korea," 1951, GLC09627.01, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards*; 1, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

²⁷ South Korea would not have direct presidential elections until 1987.

²⁸ "Police State," 1951, GLC09627.09, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards*; 9, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

the case of the “Slave Labor” card, using prisoners as slave labor.²⁹ “Red Rule in Manchuria” depicted a man at a stockade about to have his hands cut off by a saber-wielding Chinese soldier.

In many ways, the *Children’s Crusade Against Communism* card set promoted white-centric viewpoints for a white-centric and overwhelmingly young and male audience, as many trading card collections of the period demonstrated, often excluding girls.³⁰ Bowman’s executives seemingly reflected the general views of the era that the only proper Americans to be instructed on the country’s virtues and anti-communist politics were white, and that Black children were not “ideal consumers.” “White, middle class boys” were seen as more desirable consumers and considered “the ideal subject hailed by the narrative [the cards] portray.”³¹ These views are also obvious when one considers that most of the cards showed few non-whites in a positive light. Many non-white characters were portrayed in subservient positions, and helpless without American or white assistance.

Despite their popularity among children, the card set had detractors, however. For instance, the May 18, 1951, issue of the *Sydney Morning Herald* detailed how both US-based communists and American psychologists fought Bowman over the subject matter of their card sets. The communist newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, called for boycotts of Bowman’s bubble gum for its “war-inciting” tenor and negative portrayals of communists.³² Psychiatrist and

²⁹ “Slave Labor,” 1951, GLC09627.03, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children’s Crusade against Communism* trading cards; 3, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

³⁰ Harriette Kevill-Davies, “Children Crusading against Communism: Mobilizing Boys as Citizen Soldiers in the Early Cold War State,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 243.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

³² “An Ideological Aspect of Bubble-gum,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 18, 1951.

director of the Lafargue Clinic, Frederic Wertham, who would later pen the 1954 book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, linking comic books with juvenile delinquency, was another notable detractor. He argued that rather than promoting the positive aspects of American democracy, the cards were instead “whipping up a war scare in children’s minds.”³³ In response to criticism of their depiction of Mao Zedong in Card #47, a Bowman spokesperson stated that despite the “bloodthirsty” nature of its subject matter, they wanted to “give a realistic, well-rounded picture of Communism.”³⁴ Again, their “realistic” portrayal cast Mao with green skin.

The trading cards combined with other mass media efforts to reach children as nuclear testing continued. The high school handbook, *Operation Atomic Vision* by Ryland Crary, chief of the Federal Civil Defense Administration’s School Division, demonstrated this. He suggested that educators deal with their student’s fears by “instilling emotional stability in their students.”³⁵ In particular, it posited that through learning defensive skills geared towards survival in case of nuclear warfare, children would gain a greater sense of mental stability and prevent panic from infecting their ranks and effectiveness.³⁶

Among the many contradictions of the era, students were taught how to be more self-reliant, while simultaneously being taught how to cooperate with each other in teamwork exercises so that they could act more as one unit. Some classes suggested by James Ridgeway of the *American School Board Journal* for children included lessons in housing, feeding, medical care, recreation, and liaisons with the community. These and other lessons were perceived as

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and American Youth*, 81.

³⁶ Ibid., 83.

the quickest way of teaching students how to survive a nuclear war.³⁷ However, despite this increased focus on self-reliance, there were still adults who feared the worst happening to their children, and schools responded by figuring out a method of identification for students in case of any catastrophe. Methods, such as tattooing or fingerprinting children, were suggested but considered either too unlikely to survive on the body, following a nuclear attack, or simply too tedious to keep track of. Over 2.5 million children in New York City alone, for example, were given dog tags or identification necklaces as part of the government's civil defense program.³⁸

Still, there may have been little that could truly prepare children for nuclear attack, at least for "Downwinders." "Downwinders" were people who lived near, or downwind of, nuclear testing fallout. For instance, Mary Dickson, a Downwinder from Salt Lake City, Utah, witnessed one 8-year-old friend die of unknown causes that were likely cancer-related complications. Dickson also witnessed the same friend's younger brother die of testicular cancer at age four only three weeks after his sibling's death. She herself would contract thyroid cancer in 1985.³⁹ Sandra Evans Walsh, another Downwinder, living in Parowan, Utah, remembered watching nuclear tests go off nearby as she and her fellow classmates played in the radioactive dust clouds created from the bombs.⁴⁰ According to Walsh, her parents were greatly worried about their children's exposure to radioactive material and felt that the government's instructions to open their doors and windows if a bomb was dropped was nonsensical.⁴¹ These worries proved

³⁷ Ibid., 82.

³⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁹ Many Downwinders were of Native American descent, as the testing sites were often near reservations. See, Mary Dickson interview by Tony Sams and Justin Sorensen. January 11, 2017. Transcript, J. Willard Marriott Library. Salt Lake City, UT, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6qn9wn8>.

⁴⁰ Walsh, Sandra Evans. Interview by Justin Sorensen. May 30, 2019. Transcript, The Downwinders of Utah Archive, J. Willard Marriott Library. Salt Lake City, UT, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6hq8s4r>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

to be well founded, as their entire family suffered health complications from the tests. Walsh herself lost three children as a result of the radiation exposure.⁴²

Children, Popular Culture, & Preparing for Nuclear Attack

Indeed, the ongoing threat of nuclear war throughout the decade made the trading cards look like mere child's play. Though American propagandists made children a crucial component of Cold War politics and symbols of American freedom and power, many others became alarmed by the specter of nuclear war and the deleterious ways it was beginning to impact an emerging generation. This sense manifested itself in the form of civic organizations, such as the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE) and Women Strike for Peace (WSP). Both promoted images of children that showed them in danger of destruction as a result of nuclear testing.⁴³ While many groups also took the view that children were threatened by nuclear testing, these groups were the first to treat the superpowers equally in terms of the existential threat their rivalry posed to children.

For instance, SANE, founded in 1957 by Norman Cousins and other pacifists disturbed by the threat of nuclear annihilation, argued that the superpowers were creating a generation of traumatized youth, who would grow to be maladjusted adults incapable of operating in a post-nuclear world.⁴⁴ This was compounded by the fact that earlier in 1952 the National Committee on War Tensions in Children, an organization founded by private individuals and government

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Today the organization is known as Peace Action. See, Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*, 160-1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 163.

representatives, produced numerous reports of children harmed by the Cold War world. These reports discussed children, who refused to leave their homes without first-aid kits, wore handkerchiefs in order to protect their heads and necks, and had a tendency to hold their identification dog tags as if they were protective talismans against nuclear attack.⁴⁵ In the eyes of at least one delegate at the time, this proved that the climate of fear and existential dread was indeed having a deleterious effect on children.⁴⁶

A 1956 report from the US Atomic Energy Commission strengthened this view. It showed that fallout from nuclear testing had contaminated milk with the carcinogen, strontium-90, threatening the health of children by replacing the calcium in their bones with the radioactive substance.⁴⁷ The Commission's report was further corroborated by other reports made from 1951 through 1958, detailing the negative side effects of American atomic surface testing. One such instance occurred when "blue-colored snow" fell on New Mexico and Nevada for over two days in 1954, causing children to develop "reddened faces and swollen tongues." Another report made by scientists in 1958 detailed how children near the Hanford Plutonium Plant in Washington State had been exposed to 740,000 curies of radiation, 30,000 times that of the radiation that would one day be released in the infamous Three Mile Island accident of 1979.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Dorothy Barclay, "Group Plans to Study the Effects of Defense Activities on Children," *New York Times*, March 7, 1952, 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Calcium and strontium share a group on the periodic table, allowing one to be easily replaced with the other, making it especially dangerous in promoting bone cancers. See, Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*, 164.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

In one case, in 1958, SANE took out a full-page ad in the *New York Times* to argue for the safety of children against radiation from nuclear war that could contaminate their food and water. In the previous year, a SANE representative at a conference in Tokyo collected pictures of children on which she had their parents write, “Stop nuclear tests for my child’s sake.” The group sent the photographs to President Eisenhower, UK Prime Minister Macmillan, and Soviet Premier Khrushchev to remind them of the human costs of nuclear testing by foregrounding children.⁴⁹

Another operation undertaken by SANE in 1958 involved 5,000 children sending Collect on Delivery letters to the White House on Mother’s Day, all while singing “Sometimes I Feel Like My Genes Have Gone Wrong” to the tune of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” On May 23 that same year, students from New York’s SANE student office at Cooper’s Union College gathered in Manhattan to send up a “mushroom cloud of dark blue balloons” to remind adults of the high price of nuclear testing.⁵⁰ As a SANE leader said the following year during a meeting in Boston, nuclear testing was creating “a new massacre of the innocents” because its harmful side effects directly threatened children’s health. Physicist Linus Pauling argued that the current levels of strontium-90 would cause 100,000 deaths and 140,000 instances of genetic defects that would directly involve children. Pauling’s words were accompanied by Cousins’ argument in 1959. Cousins insisted that for as long as nuclear testing continued, there

⁴⁹ Ibid., 164-165.

⁵⁰ That is, letters that the White House would pay postage for upon receiving. See Peacock, *Innocent Weapons*, 165.

was no way to “wash the sky” and that there was no way to stop strontium and cesium from getting into food and milk and poisoning children.⁵¹

This method did bear results, as there were parents who felt that SANE’s message spoke to their fears before a government that seemed indifferent. But there were also those who rose in opposition to SANE’s message of nuclear disarmament precisely for the sake of children. Lewis Strauss, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission and strong proponent of nuclear deterrence, argued in a debate with SANE representative Adelaide Baker that to stop the nuclear arms race would risk the ultimate destruction of American children in a nuclear exchange. He stated that he could not support their policy if “[he] thought the welfare of [his] family was threatened more by fallout than by possible nuclear war.”⁵² In his view, protecting children from nuclear warfare meant creating even more powerful nuclear weapons as a deterrent against the USSR.

This culture of fear over nuclear war and children translated to mass media and popular culture. In the 1948 film, *The Boy with Green Hair*, the main character, Peter Fry, wakes up one day with green hair and is ridiculed not only by his peers, but by the townsfolk as well. This is compounded by the fact that Fry is an orphan of World War II, his parents having died while doing relief work in London. Eventually, he has a dream in which children tell him that his green hair marks him as the only person who can convince Russia and the United States to stop fighting so that no more war orphans are created.⁵³ Fry’s message of peace is not accepted by

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 166.

⁵³ Margot A. Henriksen, *Dr. Strangelove’s America: Society and Culture in the Atomic Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 158.

society at large. His guardian forces him to cut his green hair to avoid community ridicule, and the shame of the experience causes Fry to run away from home. After deciding that the cause of peace is worth fighting for despite society's cynicism, Fry's guardian finds him, and they decide to wait for his green hair to grow back so that he can continue carrying his message of peace and disarmament to the public.⁵⁴

Some of these themes continued in another provocative film, *Rebel Without A Cause*. Released in 1955, it took a much darker view of the struggles youth faced in the atomic age. The protagonist, Jim Stark, played by James Dean, is listless because of his distant and dysfunctional parents. He turns to delinquency to find some meaning in his life. Judy, his love interest, has issues with her parents, as well, which cause Judy to act out by purposely wearing provocative clothing, breaking curfew, and hanging out with the Wheels, a rowdy motorcycle gang. Following a volatile argument with her father that ends with Judy leaving the dinner table, her mother tells her confused father that her explosion is just a phase caused by the age they are living in, which Judy's brother then identifies as "the atomic age."⁵⁵

Plato, another character in *Rebel Without a Cause*, suffers from a complete failure of the idealized nuclear family of the 1950s. His parents are divorced, and his mother travels constantly and leaves him in the care of a housekeeper. As a result of this neglect, Plato starts to reach for stability and father-figures wherever he can find them. In this way, *Rebel Without a Cause* makes the case that the culture of fear and existential dread caused by the threat of nuclear war directly affected the three central characters of the film, and by implication,

⁵⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 163.

American youth, troubling them to the point of aimlessness, delinquency, and societal decline.⁵⁶

However, some of the most recognized films made during this time that focused on the atomic age did not come out of Hollywood. These were state-sponsored propaganda films. For example, the government produced the 1951 educational film, *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, a companion piece to a pamphlet of the same name made a year prior, following the Soviet Union ending America's nuclear monopoly by successfully detonating its own atomic bomb in 1949. It begins with the narrator, newscaster Edward R. Murrow, stating that the "reality of [their] time" was that atomic bombing could happen to American cities. Murrow tells the audience that the best way for people to survive is to understand the nature of nuclear weapons.⁵⁷ The scene then shifts to the sites of the first atomic bombings, the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Over scenes of people injured from the bombings and recovering in hospitals, including young children, Murrow tells the audience that a "large majority" of the people who suffered radiation poisoning from the bomb, no matter their severity, managed to make a complete recovery. Among those people, according to Murrow, were those able to have healthy children born without mutations, citing a Japanese nuclear family as they had a normal meal at dinner as his example.⁵⁸ The film emphasized the "survivability" of nuclear attack, with the accompanying pamphlet mentioning that "a little less than half" and "roughly

⁵⁶ Ibid., 163-165.

⁵⁷ US Civil Defense Office, "Survival Under Atomic Attack 1951 NUCLEAR BOMB SHELTER FILM 29180 HD." PeriscopeFilm, August 17, 2014, 0:32 to 0:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UW0LgiHFQQ>.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 1:39 to 2:04.

70 percent” of people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, survived within a mile of the explosions.⁵⁹

Despite the film’s idealistic view of life for post-nuclear Japan, the reality was quite different. It was true that most Japanese atomic bomb survivors suffered fewer side effects in comparison to those observed in people living near nuclear test sites. Still, they had higher cancer rates, or birth defects like those of the infamous “jellyfish baby” births around Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. Further, many of these Japanese survivors and their descendants, known as *hibukusha*, were discriminated against by people afraid that the effects of radiation sickness were not only contagious, but also hereditary. According to one survivor, some survivors made attempts to help the *hibukusha* fight the discrimination they faced, but the movement was ultimately forced to disband, following pressure by both Japanese authorities and US occupying forces that led to arrests.⁶⁰

Survival Under Atomic Attack shifts to a view of the Manhattan skyline as Murrow lambasts the concept of evacuating, stating that “the enemy” would love an opportunity to make Americans “unproductive.” Instead, he tells the viewer to prepare for total war, as America’s factories, offices, and even their homes serve as “places of duty” for the US populace.⁶¹ He then reassures the audience that so long as Americans are prepared

⁵⁹ US Civil Defense Service, *Survival Under Atomic Attack* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950), 4.

⁶⁰ Akihiro Takahashi, Yoshiyama Hideko, and Dr. Hida. Interview by Eric Beauchemin, *The survivors of the atomic bomb attack in Japan*, Radio Netherlands, August 2, 1995, <http://www.radionetherlandsarchives.org/the-survivors/>.

⁶¹ US Civil Defense Office, “Survival Under Atomic Attack 1951 NUCLEAR BOMB SHELTER FILM 29180 HD.” PeriscopeFilm, August 17, 2014, 2:20 to 2:51, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8UW0LgiHFQQ>.

beforehand, the number of deaths suffered should be less than those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁶²

Surviving Under Atomic Attack also centers American children as something for parents to protect. In one scene in which Murrow discusses what people should do against nuclear attack if they live in an apartment building, a young mother holds her son in her arms.⁶³ In another scene, Murrow goes over how one should prepare one's home against nuclear attack, and a young child hands his mother a tool to help as she and her husband work out the preparations, as if to remind the audience of what exactly is at stake when the country is under attack.⁶⁴ Next, the entire family heads to their basement to hide during an atomic attack.⁶⁵

Before the penultimate scene of *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, Murrow explains how people should be mostly "safe" after a minute, following an atomic explosion if the detonation was not either underwater or at ground level, lest fallout be launched into the atmosphere.⁶⁶ Afterwards, the father is seen washing his son's hair in order to rid it of irradiated particles kicked up by the atomic detonation.⁶⁷ The short ends with Murrow making the case that "if Hiroshima and Nagasaki had known what [the US knows] about civil defense, thousands of lives would've been saved."⁶⁸ Notably, this quote, and the whole short in fact, treats the bombings

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 4:00 to 4:06.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 4:59 to 5:07.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 5:15 to 6:39.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 7:33 to 7:50.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 8:17 to 8:25.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 8:26.

of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as if they were merely terrible accidents, instead of a deliberate act of war on the part of the United States.

Perhaps the most popular state-sponsored film of this era was the 1952 educational short, *Duck and Cover*. This film was distributed by the short-lived New York City-based ad agency, Archer Productions, and was the brainchild of executive producer and company head Leo M. Langlois, an advertising veteran, and copy writer turned novice screenwriter, Raymond W. Mauer. The film's name was originally "Civil Defense for Schools," a title suggested by government officials, but was changed following a suggestion by Helen Seth-Smith. She was a British transplant and assistant headmistress of the Virginia-based Potomac School. During a meeting at the National Education Administration to discuss the film, she mentioned that students at her school practiced "duck and cover" drills, and the name stuck.⁶⁹

The short begins with a chorus as Bert, an anthropomorphic turtle, wearing a bow tie and Civil Defense helmet, walks around before ducking down and hiding inside his shell after a monkey hanging on a tree explodes a stick of dynamite near him. Its purpose as an instructional video for children is made clear by the last line of the chorus, which directly states that what Bert ends up doing to protect himself is "what [they] all must learn to do."⁷⁰ The film then switches mediums to a live-action format that serves as the bulk of the short, as the scene changes to a classroom filled with children and a teacher picked from P.S. 152 in Astoria, Queens in New York City. Save for two Black children in the classroom, every child in the short

⁶⁹ Daniel Eagan, *America's Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 452.

⁷⁰ Archer Productions, "'DUCK AND COVER' Civil Defense film from 1951." Eric Stephens Jacobs, January 26, 2012, Educational video, 0:28 to 0:34, <https://youtu.be/NjQM18JA9s4>.

is white.⁷¹ The narrator, actor Robert Middleton, describes the children doing “duck and cover drills” in a classroom as a normal activity “just as [they] do in [their] school.” This implies that these drills are something the child audience should already be familiar with.⁷² There was truth in this assumption, as nuclear drills were already common in New York schools.⁷³

Middleton conducts an overview on how to identify when an atomic bomb has gone off, and the damage it can do to structures and people. But he assures his audience that as long as the children “duck and cover” like Bert the Turtle, they will be safe from the worst of the attack.⁷⁴ In the last portion of the video, Middleton affirms that children must be constantly ready to face an atomic attack, and that doing “duck and cover” will protect them from the worst of it.⁷⁵ As historian Robert A. Jacobs puts it, the short implicitly states that in order for children to survive, they must be in “a constant state of readiness for nuclear war.”⁷⁶ Finally, Bert the Turtle, voiced by future *Adventures of Superman* narrator Carl Ritchie, asks the children if they understood everything they needed to do. They respond with an enthusiastic, “duck and cover!”⁷⁷

Duck and Cover is considered one of the defining propaganda films of Cold War politics and the nuclear age, and Bert the Turtle would become a particularly well-known breakout

⁷¹ Save for the teacher, Vincent Bohan, as of 2010, no one has been able to positively determine the identities of the children used in *Duck and Cover*, though Langlois' son Hitch and Mauer himself do cameos in the short.

⁷² *Archer Productions*, “‘DUCK AND COVER’ Civil Defense film from 1951.” Eric Stephens Jacobs, January 26, 2012, Educational video, 1:18 to 1:24, <https://youtu.be/NjQM18JA9s4>.

⁷³ “New York Civil Defense drill. 1950's.” AnneStewartHollywood, October 27, 2011, Stock footage, 1:02 to 1:08, <https://youtu.be/sb-BPI0bgqs>.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:41 to 2:44.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 8:08 to 8:23.

⁷⁶ Robert A. Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 105.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8:50 to 8:59.

character. Bert became so popular that he would appear in a fourteen-minute radio show, a newspaper comic strip, an expanded commercial recording of the song sung by Dick “Two Ton Baker” for Coral Records, and a color pamphlet for schools. Three million copies of the pamphlet were sold.⁷⁸ As historian Harriette Kevill-Davies notes, the fact that this short was shown nationwide makes it clear that children were well aware of “the dangers of nuclear attack and, by association, the struggle against the threat of communism.”⁷⁹ Bert’s success as a cautious, disciplined, and patriotic animated character reflected the efforts propagandists made to reach American children.

Duck and Cover and *Survival Under Atomic Attack* have their similarities and differences, apart from the shared subject matter of nuclear war. *Duck and Cover* is an animation/live-action hybrid short that is explicitly meant for and focused on children and their survival during an atomic attack. *Survival Under Atomic Attack* is a live-action short that features children, but focuses more on society in general, and is primarily intended for an adult audience. One thing both have in common, however, is how little both feature nonwhite actors.

Duck and Cover’s only nonwhite characters are the two Black children, who are part of the classroom, but neither of whom have any speaking lines, and are essentially extras. *Survival Under Atomic Attack* actually has more nonwhite characters in the form of the Japanese residents of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet, they are only there as a comparison to the short’s real main character, the population of the United States, of which all Americans shown are

⁷⁸ Daniel Eagan, *America’s Film Legacy: The Authoritative Guide to the Landmark Movies in the National Film Registry*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 452.

⁷⁹ Harriette Kevill-Davies, “Children Crusading against Communism: Mobilizing Boys as Citizen Soldiers in the Early Cold War State,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 21 (2018): 236.

white. Both shorts have the implicit assumption, as did most popular media in this decade, that to be “truly” American was to be white. If any nonwhite people were to appear at all, they would either simply be a foreign “Other,” as the Japanese were in *Survival Under Atomic Attack*, or outright hostile and inhuman, as were the Filipino Huk rebels and Chinese leader Mao Zedong in the *Children’s Crusade Against Communism* cards. Others were simply helpless without American assistance as the South Korean refugees in the “Fleeing the Reds” card were.⁸⁰ Yet, this treatment of the “Other” was even more clear when it came to how the United States viewed Black children.

The Attack Comes: Brown v. Board of Education & the Little Rock Nine

Much of the country’s concern for American youth, their safety, future prospects, and importance to signaling America’s strength and freedom did not extend to non-white children during the 1950s. Indeed, the anti-communist fight and America’s global image broke down along lines of race. This point was especially illustrated by massive white resistance to the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education and the Little Rock Nine*. In the country’s fight to combat Russian power and influence by elevating American youth and preparing them for attack from without, America failed to protect a group of children against an attack from within merely because they were Black. This moment could have been a

⁸⁰ “Fleeing the Reds; Huk Raiders; War-Maker,” 1951, GLC09627.11.02; GLC09627.43; GLC09627.47, Bowman Gum Company, *Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism* trading cards; 11, 43, 47, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

powerful political weapon against a Cold War foe. Instead, it exposed American propaganda for promoting only white children as proper “children,” deserving of protection.

By comparison, Cold War propaganda depicted white children as something to be treasured and protected from the communist menace and atomic attack. And Jim Crow segregation helped reinforce this, a point that government officials were aware of as early as 1947. It was then that Acting Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, reported on the state of civil rights in the country during the Truman Administration, writing:

[T]he existence of discrimination against minority groups in this country has an adverse effect upon our relations with other countries. We are reminded over and over by some foreign newspapers and spokesmen, that our treatment of various minorities leaves much to be desired. While sometimes these pronouncements are exaggerated and unjustified, they all too frequently point with accuracy to some form of discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin. Frequently we find it next to impossible to formulate a satisfactory answer to our critics in other countries; the gap between the things we stand for in principle and the facts of a particular situation may be too wide to be bridged.⁸¹

The report looked at segregated public education in the North and South and concluded that racial discrimination was rampant across the country. For example, the report stated:

Poverty-stricken though it was after the close of the Civil War, the South chose to maintain two sets of public schools, one for whites and one for Negroes. With respect to education, as well as to other public services, the Committee believes that the "separate but equal" rule has not been obeyed in practice. There is a marked difference in quality between the educational opportunities offered white children and Negro children in the

⁸¹ Charles E. Wilson and United States, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947): 63.

separate schools. Whatever test is used -- expenditure per pupil, teachers' salaries, the number of pupils per teacher, transportation of students, adequacy of school buildings and educational equipment, length of school term, extent of curriculum—Negro students are invariably at a disadvantage.⁸²

The report indicated that ultimately, state funds alone would not be enough to make up the difference between Black and white schools because the strain caused by “separate but equal” was too great. The report suggested that federal aid would be required and questioned whether the federal government should grant funds to states that maintained separate schools.⁸³

By and large, the report did not paint a rosy picture of race relations in schools outside of the South either. For instance, while northern states appeared desegregated, the report pointed out that due to redlining in many northern cities, referred to in the report as “residential restrictions,” schools in Chicago were overcrowded and were forced to use double-shift schooling for predominantly Black students.⁸⁴ Texas occasionally segregated Mexican-American students, a policy it shared with California regarding Mexican-American students and Native American students, until new legislation was later introduced.⁸⁵ In New York City, examinations of private schools showed that they discriminated against the admission of Jewish students despite their high grades, and medical schools discriminated against both Black and Jewish applicants, with fewer than fifty of the latter graduating within the previous twenty-five

⁸² Ibid., 63-64.

⁸³ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁴ A type of schooling in which one group of students would be taught earlier during the day, and another later. See, Charles E. Wilson and United States, *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 65.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 65.

years.⁸⁶ The report made the point that this discriminatory policy by northern private schools was “in serious conflict with patterns of democratic life,” and served to deny the public the “manifold social and economic benefits” that marginalized communities would otherwise be able to contribute.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, the report’s critical suggestions about fixing racial discrimination in schools were mostly ignored.

Interestingly, in 1951, the *Children’s Crusade Against Communism* trading cards tried to address some of these points by obliquely referencing Soviet criticisms of racial issues in the United States through the card titled, “Negro GIs Hold the Line.” It depicted Black soldiers fighting North Korean forces during the 1950 Miracle of Christmas, the successful evacuation of both UN forces and more than 86,000 North Korean civilians from Hungnam, North Korea and surrounding areas in mid-December.⁸⁸ The card claimed that while communists may try to divide Americans by reminding them of their differences, all Americans, regardless of their race, were “one in [their] love and defense of God’s freedom.”⁸⁹ Notably, out of the entire *Children’s Crusade Against Communism* set, this was the only card that depicted nonwhites in ways that were neither negative nor subservient to white Americans. Still, that same year, Oliver Brown, alongside twelve other Black parents, filed a suit against the Topeka Board of Education calling for the city to reverse its policy of racially segregated schools. For the Browns, their case

⁸⁶ Ibid., 66-67.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁸ Among the evacuees were the parents of future South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

⁸⁹ “Negro GIs Hold Line,” 1951, GLC09627.16.02, Bowman Gum Company, Fight the Red Menace: The Children's Crusade against Communism trading cards; 16, Gilder Lehrman Collection, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

involved the fact that their daughter, Linda, had to go to a Black school that was farther away, rather than a white school that was closer and within their school district.

In many ways, the odds were against Brown. His first attempt failed in Topeka's District Court. The Court ruled in favor of the Board by citing *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 case that served as the legal backbone for "separate but equal." They reasoned that though the distances Black students traveled did have detrimental effects on their education, their school facilities were still equal in all other respects.⁹⁰ Another case used to support the Topeka Court's decision was the *Lum v. Rice* case of 1927. Here, the US Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the state of Mississippi could prevent a Chinese-American, Martha Lum, from attending a white school on the basis of race. Chief Justice William Howard Taft reasoned that this was not a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment because of the "separate but equal" precedent. He also ruled that Mississippi had the sovereign right as a state to decide who was allowed to attend its public schools.⁹¹

But Brown appealed the Topeka decision, which reached the US Supreme Court first in 1952, and was reargued again in 1953. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought the case and made Brown the headline case, combining it with similar cases that were challenging racial segregation throughout the country. For instance, *Davis v. Board of Prince Edward County*, a case in Virginia that was one of the cases under the banner of Brown, described some of the conditions affecting Black schools there at

⁹⁰ Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, 98 F. Supp. 797 (D. Kan. 1951).

⁹¹ The Lums had a desire not to have their children go to school with Black children, as the only choice left to them would have been to go to a "colored" school. Gong Lum v. Rice, 275 U.S. 78 (1927). See, Adrienne Berard, *Water Tossing Boulders: How a Family of Chinese Immigrants Led the First Fight to Desegregate Schools in the Jim Crow South*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 139.

the time. One student involved in the case, Joan Cobb, stated that her school, Moton High, was dilapidated:

In winter the school was very cold. And a lot of times we had to put on our jackets. Now, the students that sat closest to the wood stove were very warm and the ones who sat farthest away were very cold. And I remember being cold a lot of times and sitting in the classroom with my jacket on. When it rained, we would get water through the ceiling. So there were lots of pails sitting around the classroom. And sometimes we had to raise our umbrellas to keep the water off our heads. It was a very difficult setting for trying to learn.⁹²

These conditions led many of the Moton students to court in 1952. They were initially unsuccessful. While the judges agreed that the facilities at Moton High were indeed inferior to those of the white-only school, violating the “separate but equal” doctrine, they reasoned this was still not enough to desegregate the district.⁹³

Yet, Cobb’s story and others formed the foundation of the *Brown v. Board* case, which was reheard on December 8, 1953. Handed down on May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Warren delivered the unanimous decision, arguing that racial segregation in schools led to “a feeling of inferiority as to [Black students’] status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”⁹⁴ As such, public schools were legally desegregated.

⁹² “Joan Johns Cobb, interview by PBS, 2002, *The History of Jim Crow*, https://web.archive.org/web/20070301120537/http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/resources/narratives/Joan_Johns_Cobb.htm

⁹³ *Davis v. County School Board*, 103 E.D. Va. 337 (1952).

⁹⁴ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

The *Brown* decision was unprecedented, striking down “separate but equal” as “inherently unequal.” And for a brief moment, this unprecedented event signaled before the world the virtues of American democracy against the USSR. The United States government was aware that the world was watching the events of the case, and that in the Cold War’s battle for minds and influence over the Soviet Union, racism and racial segregation severely damaged America’s global image.⁹⁵

The *Hindustan Times* of New Delhi ran an article titled “A Great Decision,” which argued that the case would help bolster American democracy at a time when racial segregation served as “a long-standing blot on American life and civilization.”⁹⁶ The Nigerian *West African Pilot* newspaper released an editorial that argued that the action was of “particular significance and special interest to Africans and people of African descent throughout the world.” It argued that as the self-proclaimed leader of the democratic world, the United States was obligated to set an example for other nations by removing all forms of racism from national life.⁹⁷ The *Sydney Morning Herald*, an Australian newspaper, made a similar point, while also reporting that many Southern politicians had stated their intention to disregard it:

To-day's thinking on the civil rights of Negroes in America is a product of the changes that have occurred as a consequence of two world wars. In the attempt to exert international leadership in a context with world Communism, the United States has been severely handicapped by what the non-white race have felt about the treatment of Negroes in America. The most powerful item of propaganda available to Communists

⁹⁵ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 106-107.

⁹⁶ Mary Dudziak, “Brown as a Cold War Case,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (Jun 2004): 35.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

has been the alleged second-class citizenship of more than 15 million of these Americans. (...)To-day ... the U.S. Supreme Court's decision should go a long way toward dissipating the validity of the Communist contention of Western democracy as hypocritical.⁹⁸

And national events surrounding nine Black children in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 made this especially clear. These students, Earnest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Thelma Mothershed, and Melba Pattillo Beals, ages fifteen to seventeen, enrolled to integrate the all-white Central High School. They came to be known as the Little Rock Nine. This could have been an opportunity for the United States to show the world the power of democracy in overcoming race, as some international newspapers pointed out. But the Nine faced not only the staunch resistance of Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, but also a virulent and violent backlash from the greater white community within the state and even across the nation.

As the students prepared to integrate the school, Faubus made the infamous statement that “blood [would] run in the streets” if Black students attempted to enter Central High. Amid a rabid mob determined to prevent their entry to the school, the children had to eventually be escorted by the 101st Airborne Division. Governor Faubus was also there, using the Arkansas National Guard to block their way. Earnest Green, one of the Black students, recalled years later that Faubus claimed that he had deployed the state’s National Guard to “protect” the students from an angry white mob and to preserve “the protection and tranquility of the city.”⁹⁹ There

⁹⁸ “Evolution of Racial Equality: Court’s Schools Ruling Eases U.S. Conscience,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 21, 1954.

⁹⁹ Henry Hampton, Steve Fayer, and Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s Through the 1980s*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 56.

were other reports that “caravans of automobiles of white supremacists were heading towards Little Rock from all over the state.”¹⁰⁰ Out of concern for their safety, following conversations with local ministers and the police on how best to protect the children, Daisy Bates, the leader of the local chapter of the NAACP called the parents of the students to tell them to meet with her as a group for their first day of school. She was, however, unable to contact the parents of Elizabeth Eckford, who were too poor to afford a telephone.¹⁰¹ The next day, September 4, 1957, Bates, accompanied by her husband, drove over to meet with the ministers, police, and the children to walk to Central High. But soon they heard a report on the radio: “A Negro girl was being mobbed at Central High.”

Eckford, unaware that mobs were forming, went to Central High by herself that fateful day instead of with the group, and was immediately accosted by a racist mob screaming that no “nigger bitch” would attend “their” school.¹⁰² Her confrontation with one Hazel Massery, who was part of a racist mob of teenage white girls, was photographed by photojournalist Will Counts. The photograph would be seen around the world.¹⁰³ According to an account by *New York Times* photojournalist, Benjamin Fine, shared years later, Massery told the Little Rock-born Eckford that she should “[go] back home to Africa.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1986), 61.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 66-67.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁰³ Following the events of Little Rock, Massery would in the 1960s privately apologize by telephone to Eckford for her past racist behavior, and the two would end up becoming friends decades later. They eventually had a dispute in the late 1990s due to a combination of outside scrutiny and unresolved issues between them.

¹⁰⁴ David Margolick, “Elizabeth Eckford and Hazel Bryan: the story behind the photograph that shamed America,” *The Telegraph*, October 9, 2011, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/8813134/Elizabeth-Eckford-and-Hazel-Bryan-the-story-behind-the-photograph-that-shamed-America.html>.

After Arkansas National Guardsmen prevented Eckford from entering the school, she was again accosted by angry white mobs as she struggled to leave. Some of the adult women screamed for her to be lynched, while adult men chanted, "Go home, you bastard of a black bitch!"¹⁰⁵ Eventually with the help of Mrs. Grace Lorch, a white woman and the wife of Professor Dr. Lee Lorch of Philander Smith College, Eckford was able to get on a bus and to safety.¹⁰⁶ The mob's actions showed that despite America's claims to the contrary, most white Americans viewed Black Americans as "lesser Americans" than they were.

The events of that day proved deeply traumatizing for Eckford, who would stay with the Bates family for two nights. She even woke Bates with the screams of her nightmares.¹⁰⁷ With the notable exception of when lawyer and future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall came to Little Rock to talk to the children about the importance of the court cases he and the NAACP were pressing, Bates observed that Eckford was "present...but not really involved in things," as the trauma of that day had been too great.¹⁰⁸ Even decades later, in an interview by Grif Stockley for a book on Bates, entitled, *Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas*, Eckford was asked whether Bates had been an emotionally supportive figure for her or the other Nine. Eckford was blunt: "I think not."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, 70.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 70-71. The Lorches had been deeply involved in civil rights prior to Little Rock and had moved there after City College in NYC and Penn State blacklisted Dr. Lorch for his efforts at integration. Following Little Rock, they would have to move again due to death threats caused by Mrs. Lorch's involvement in getting Eckford to safety, combined with further blacklisting by universities, eventually settling in Canada.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰⁹ Grif Stockley, *Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 173.

Melba Pattillo Beals also had a harrowing experience that day. As she watched the racist mob attack Eckford, she and her mother barely escaped rope-wielding members of the mob, who declared, “Now we got us a nigger,” while chasing them.¹¹⁰ Beals admitted that she “had always been afraid of the white people of Little Rock,” and credited her mother’s quick thinking in getting them to the car and saving their lives from the would-be murderers.¹¹¹ They too, were front-row witnesses to the hollowness of American claims that all children were valued.

The Little Rock Nine again attempted to enter Central High on September 23, aware that, according to radio reports, mobs were again prepared to kill them in order, they claimed, to prevent Black people from “marrying their daughters.”¹¹² Still, the nine teenagers were willing to face the mobs with solemn determination. After they entered the school, mobs managed to overrun the school’s defenses, forcing the children to hunker down in the principal's office in a different kind of “duck and cover,” leading Beals to believe that she “[was going] to die [there], in school.”¹¹³ Eventually, they were removed and driven out in police cars.¹¹⁴ When Daisy Bates was asked by reporters if the children were to be sent to Horace Mann, a Black school, because of the violence, her answer was that the Nine would remain out of school until “the President of the United States guaranteed them protection.”¹¹⁵

The Little Rock Nine were finally able to enter Central High on September 25, 1957, following President Eisenhower’s reluctant nationalization of the Arkansas National Guard and

¹¹⁰ Melba Pattillo Beals, “Interview with Melba Pattillo Beals,” interview by Orlando Bagwell, *Eyes on the Prize*, November 30, 1985, video, 48:24, https://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip_151-z02z31p977.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, 89.

¹¹³ Hampton, et. al., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s*, 63.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹¹⁵ Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*, 93.

his summoning of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock. The need for integration via soldiers again put American hypocrisy on full display. From then on, according to Thelma Mothershed, the children would all meet at the Bates home in the morning, go to school together, and return there in the evening for their parents to pick them up, giving themselves more support as a united front than they would have alone.¹¹⁶ However, their troubles were far from over. They continued to suffer covert and overt racist abuse on the part of both white students and faculty throughout the school year.

For instance, Terrance Brown told Grif Stockley in an interview for *Crusader from Arkansas* that “in order to truly demonstrate how the other side was evil,” what he referred to as “militant retribution,” would not help the Nine.¹¹⁷ In another instance, Beals remembered getting acid thrown in her face by a white student, damaging her eyesight. And yet she refused to keep her medical eyepatch on in the presence of reporters, lest the reporters “ask questions and make a big deal of it,” even though not wearing the eyepatch risked hampering her recovery.¹¹⁸

When comparing what happened to the Little Rock Nine to contemporary views about children, a certain narrative, and its contradictions, becomes obvious. *Duck and Cover* and *Survival Under Atomic Attack* both dealt with the safety of children. Many of the racist white adults comprising the mob that accosted the Nine had likely watched either one or both films, or other films like them, either as a parent or, in the case of the younger adults and older

¹¹⁶ Hampton, et. al., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement*, 65.

¹¹⁷ Stockley, *Daisy Bates*, 79.

¹¹⁸ Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 121-3.

teenagers, as children. While white parents may have shown concern towards their own children, their white supremacist views meant that they would not show the same concern towards the Little Rock Nine, or more precisely, nine Black children. Rather than being seen as fellow Americans, as Cold War propaganda would have the world believe, they were considered no different than any of the “un-American” caricatures that framed Mao Zedong and the North Koreans in *the Children’s Crusade Against Communism* card series. The mob did not bat an eye as they terrorized Elizabeth Eckford, when Beals was nearly blinded in an acid attack, or as members of the Little Rock white community continued to heap other indignities upon the nine Black children and their families throughout the rest of their time at Central High. If they were truly considered equal, Central would not have been desegregated at virtual gunpoint. Earnest Green, the oldest and first to graduate, remembered Minnijean Brown’s suspension and then expulsion for retaliating against a white tormentor, what Brown may have considered “militant retribution.” She dumped chili on the head of the student in the cafeteria.¹¹⁹ She was forced to finish her education in New York.

Conclusion

By the 1960s, threats of nuclear attack only escalated, and American children continued to be critical to these developments, though issues of race had already exposed America for what its propaganda and Cold War politics really were.

¹¹⁹ Hampton, et. al., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement*, 65.

It is notable that during the early 1960s, a common joke children shared with each other was, “What are you going to be *if* you grow up?”¹²⁰ This spoke to the climate of fear generated by nuclear war, and how both affected a whole generation of youth. Despite their parent’s best efforts to shield them from the worst of what was happening, current events of the time affected them nonetheless. On April 9, 1962, President Kennedy delivered a speech in Dallas, Texas to representatives of the Children’s Bureau, an organization founded in 1912. He stressed the importance of youth groups teaching children to assist in bringing “freedom, dignity, and peace throughout the world.”¹²¹

That same year, psychologist Sibylle K. Escalona, published a pamphlet entitled *Children and the Threat of Nuclear War*. The pamphlet discussed the struggles children faced because of tensions between the United States and Soviet Union. Escalona rejected the idea that children were too young to concern themselves with “grownup problems,” such as nuclear war, and were in fact aware of what was going on.¹²² As an example, she cited cases in which children played “good guy and bad guy” games, and Russians were the bad guys with “all the powers of evil they could imagine.”¹²³ She also presented a survey of fourth and fifth graders taken in October 1961. The survey asked each child to write one question, pertaining to themselves, their school, and the world. Ninety-eight percent of their questions related to either nuclear

¹²⁰ Sibylle K. Escalona, “Growing up with the Threat of Nuclear War,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 52, no. 4 (October 1982): 606.

¹²¹ John F. Kennedy, “Remarks on the 50th Anniversary of the Children’s Bureau,” April 9, 1962, Papers of John F. Kennedy, JFKPOF-037-038, JFK Library, <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKPOF/037/JFKPOF-037-038>.

¹²² Sibylle K. Escalona, *Children and the Threat of Nuclear War* (New York: Child Study Association of America, 1962), 5.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

war, bombs, or the possibility that there might not even be a world in the immediate future.¹²⁴

The Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 only compounded these problems. Over the course of the thirteen-day crisis, the possibility of war with the Soviets was foremost in Kennedy's mind.

Reportedly, so was the threat to children. According to Dave Powers, Kennedy's longtime friend, Kennedy said that if it were not for the children, it would have been "far easier to press that button."¹²⁵

Still, for many Black children, the real existential threat did not lay between the US and the communist world. It lay between what America promised all its youth and what it actually practiced. The deaths of young Downwinders, who, as Mary Dickson noted, were seen by the rest of the country as irrelevant and expendable "Mormons...cowboys, and Indians," made this clear.¹²⁶ The experiences of the Little Rock Nine against the existential threat of racial violence in the wake of *Brown* made this even clearer.

Children faced the constant bombardment of messages reminding them of the dangers of nuclear attack from without, but for the Little Rock Nine, that attack came from within. There were no educational films to instruct children on preparing for this kind of attack. This was the case because the nation's conception of "children" primarily rested on white children, their safety, and their future prospects.

By 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson seemed to pick up on these issues. Johnson promoted a political ad, entitled "Daisy," for his Presidential campaign against Republican Barry

¹²⁴ Ibid., 6.

¹²⁵ George, *Awaiting Armageddon*, 138.

¹²⁶ Mary Dickson interview by Tony Sams and Justin Sorensen. January 11, 2017. Transcript, J. Willard Marriott Library. Salt Lake City, UT, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/ark:/87278/s6qn9wn8>.

Goldwater. Aired only once on NBC on September 7, 1964, the ad featured a young girl as she counted the petals of a daisy she had picked in a flower field. After she plucks all the petals off the flower, a countdown marking the seconds before a nuclear launch goes off. She is locked in terror. As the scene shifts to a nuclear explosion, and a mushroom cloud fills the atmosphere, the narrator, President Johnson himself, states: "These are the stakes! To make a world in which all God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die."¹²⁷

Indeed, Johnson seemed to recognize that race ultimately laid bare the falsehood in America's claims that the country's children were equally valuable and fundamental to demonstrating American democracy against its Cold War foes. This was where America's propaganda fell apart as empty and hollow. White Americans feared white children dying in an atomic attack during a clash between the United States and USSR. Black Americans feared a more immediate, existential threat for their children—that Black youth might become victims of racist violence at the hands of their fellow citizens amid the challenges of the Cold War world. In this period of intense propaganda, fear, and contradiction, protecting the Little Rock Nine could have perhaps been the greatest weapon in America's Cold War arsenal, proving that all children were equal in value under American democracy.

¹²⁷ *Library of Congress*, "'Daisy' Ad (1964): Preserved from 35mm in the Tony Schwartz Collection," September 17, 2016, video, 1:20, <https://youtu.be/riDypP1KfOU>.

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