

The Atomic American: Citizenship in a Nuclear State, 1945-1963

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Nuclear weapons altered the relationship between the American state and its citizens in the early years of the Cold War. From the 1945 Trinity Test forward, Americans grappled with the consequences of the nuclear weapons revolution. Among other challenges facing the nation, it was clear that military defense against a nuclear strike was nearly impossible and civilian preparation programs could cost billions of dollars. Should deterrence peacekeeping fail, Americans would face an attack without military protection, making large-scale civilian casualties unavoidable. “And yet,” Senator Brien McMahon puzzled in 1950, “the first duty of a sovereignty is to protect its people.”¹ Nuclear weapons unsettled Americans’ ideas about federal protection, individual responsibility, and public safety. Under the threat posed by nuclear technology, these conflicting concerns shaped domestic and international policy and framed national community in the Atomic Age.

In my dissertation, *The Atomic American: Citizenship in a Nuclear State, 1945-1963*, I argue that the changing possibilities of nuclear war provoked discussions about political responsibility throughout the United States, among policymakers and civilians alike. As Americans learned about nuclear technology, they raised fundamental questions about the role of the state. In a nuclearized world, who was responsible for the nation’s safety? What could the government and citizens expect from one another? The resulting conversations hinged upon what I call *nuclear citizenship*: the relationship between the citizen and the American state, constructed in an environment of rapidly-changing technology and the threat of nuclear war.

The scale, severity, and unpredictability of a nuclear attack diminished the state’s capacity to assure the continuity of civilian life through active defense. Instead, policymakers established a system of passive—or civil—defense that placed the burden of survival on individuals. Political leaders urged citizens to seek information, training, and preparation supplies to protect themselves and the nation. In charging citizens with the task of self-help, the state framed survival as responsible citizenship. The ways Americans acted in the interest of survival,

however, were varied, complex, and often contradictory. Some citizens followed official civil defense suggestions, but many more developed alternative means for facilitating survival. These Americans saw their actions, even when they were at odds with state instructions, as expressions of patriotism and civic-mindedness. When examined as a whole, the diverse language of nuclear survival reveals a complex public conversation about the meaning of citizenship in the Atomic Age.

Today, historical critics dismiss civil defense as a disingenuous government plot to calm panicked citizens, win support for diplomatic policy, or obscure nuclear dangers. This view exaggerates federal power and erases civilian agency. More importantly, it discounts the careful and concerned deliberations among scientists and policymakers, and ignores the many ways the public learned about and adapted to the nuclear threat. By placing nuclear knowledge in the context of civic activism, I argue that participation in civil defense—whether official or unofficial—was a political act.

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Debates over nuclear citizenship took place in a surprising variety of venues. In federal agencies, policymakers employed countless specialists, ranging from psychologists to engineers, to evaluate the feasibility and expected public reception of civil defense strategies. Official civil defense publications tightly managed the availability of official nuclear information, always with an eye toward protecting national security and preventing public panic. In state and municipal governments, civil defense directors defined nuclear citizenship in regional terms, adjusting federal recommendations to fit local demographics, budgets, and geographies. At the personal level, church congregations, parent-teacher organizations, youth clubs, and other community groups prepared for nuclear war in the local civic sphere. Community forums provided individual Americans with opportunities to learn about nuclear technology, places to articulate their fears and concerns, and means to act in response. Using a language of civic duty, national pride, and democratic participation, Americans

staked a deep and personal claim in nuclear policies. Thus in the early years of the nuclear age, actors at all levels of government and society began to link citizenship, the state, and nuclear technology in ways that previous scholars have not considered.

During the early Cold War, New York State emerged as an important site at which American citizens negotiated the complexities of the nuclear threat. As the home to New York City, a location overwhelmingly assumed to be a prime target in the event of war, Albany faced unique challenges to the federalist organization of civil defense funding. With the potential cost of protecting New York City so high, how would the state distribute civil defense expenditures? Over the course of the 1950s, it became more and more apparent to policymakers—in Albany, New York City, and in Washington—that the only feasible way to protect millions of Americans in the event of an attack was civil defense shelters. But by in large, states and the federal government could not afford to build shelters on a nationwide scale. Instead, officials told Americans, citizens would have to build, stock, and pay for these shelters themselves, an extension of the self-help civil defense ethos that policymakers had promoted since the early 1950s.

However, the responsibility of building one's own shelter fell heavier on some Americans than others. As nuclear weapons became more destructive over the course of the early Cold War, New Yorkers noted the disparity between rural, suburban, and urban spaces with horror. As one resident noted about a home in Jamaica, New York, only "a hardened, hermetically sealed shelter would serve the purpose" of protecting its inhabitants.² In other words, such shelters would come at a much greater cost to urban residents; survival would be significantly more expensive to assure in the cities than outside of them. Moreover, building one's own shelter required a significant financial output and the physical space to build, resources that were in short supply for many urban residents. Many New Yorkers thus noted the class disparity of self-help civil defense. Comparing inner cities with their wealthier suburbs, another resident asked, "are poor districts less worth 'saving'?... What about New York City? Is it written off?"³ Because of the

relative implausibility of saving the majority of New York City residents in the event of an attack, it is unsurprising that the City became one of the earliest sites of civil defense protest. However, the heated public discussion about urban residents' access to survival in the Atomic Age eventually spread to cities and towns across the nation. By the early 1960s, protest against civil defense, and nuclear policy more broadly, became a national movement.

By the end of the 1950s, New York State became a locus for discussion about civil defense for another reason as well: Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller was a vocal advocate of civil defense programs. During his first few years in office, Rockefeller built a fallout shelter in the Executive Mansion in Albany, went on state- and nation-wide promotional campaigns for civil defense, and fast-tracked a controversial \$100,000,000 budget line to build fallout shelters in public schools. By the start of Rockefeller's term in 1959, however, civil defense programs had fallen out of favor with several influential governors and members of Congress. By the early 1960s, Rockefeller had entered into a public feud with Governor Robert Meyner of New Jersey, who repeatedly called out Rockefeller and other civil defense proponents for "fostering a cruel deception on the American people" that underground shelters could provide a legitimate defense against a nuclear attack.⁴ Thus, Rockefeller became a household name among those in favor of civil defense and the growing number of Americans in opposition to it.

Early in his governorship, Rockefeller also commissioned a series of reports on civil defense programs in New York State. 1959's Special Task Force on Protection from Radioactive Fallout reexamined civil defense in the context of radioactive fallout, a relatively new consideration among civil defense officials.⁵ The public had only been aware of the dangerousness of nuclear fallout since the mid-1950s, and by the end of the decade, scientists were still divided about its long-term effects on human health. But despite several years of heated public debate and public awareness of fallout as a separate danger of nuclear war, federal civil defense officials had not significantly altered safety

recommendations. Rockefeller's Task Force represented one of the earliest wholesale reconsiderations of civil defense as a program to protect against fallout and not only the blast and fire destruction wrought by a nuclear attack (it was not until the late 1950s that the term *fallout shelter* supplanted *bomb shelter* in popular and official parlance). Thus, Rockefeller sent the Task Force's publication, "Protection from Radioactive Fallout," to governors and officials all over the nation and it became one of the crucial studies used by the federal government to reshape civil defense policies in the 1960s.

As a result of his personal and political public safety campaigns, Governor Rockefeller received correspondence about civil defense from all over the country. Until 1961, when President Kennedy announced his plans to revitalize the national civil defense program, Rockefeller was the name most easily identified with the nation's civil defense efforts. Americans wrote to Rockefeller to commend his programs; to offer their support, advice, and ideas; to send him news clippings from across the globe; and to request information or financial support for civil defense programs. Americans also wrote to Rockefeller with a variety of criticisms about civil defense programs. Many balked at the cost of civil defense, but others feared that civil defense programs only encouraged nuclear war, rather than working to prevent it. Rockefeller's correspondence files from the first several years of his tenure as governor serve as a snapshot of the deeply polarized attitudes toward civil defense at the start of the 1960s. Much had changed since the early 1950s, when public attitudes toward civil defense policies were generally favorable.

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Broadly speaking, my dissertation reorients the historical understanding of the early nuclear age in the United States by using a broad lens to understand civil defense and public safety. Many studies of the domestic Cold War focus exclusively on state-produced information. Educational programs such as "Duck and Cover" dominate academic discussions at the expense of understanding how

Americans acted in response to the threat. In contrast, I use two categories of records to explore the dynamic relationship between citizens, the state, and nuclear technology. First, I use state- and federal-level civil defense agency records to explain how policymakers developed and maintained civil defense strategies and public information campaigns. Secondly, I use national civic group documents, local organizational records, personal correspondence, and popular media to show that civilians learned about, understood, and engaged with the changing nuclear threat outside of official civil defense channels. As such, I demonstrate that civil defense was simultaneously a grassroots phenomenon and a top-down federal project; a flexible cultural response that adapted to changing scientific awareness throughout the period; and a civic act that involved more Americans than previously assumed.

I conducted research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) in February 2016, thanks to a generous grant-in-aid. The collections at the Center have helped me amass critical sources that illustrate both the top-down and bottom-up histories of civil defense. Records about civil defense, bomb shelters and fallout shelters, and nuclear policies are scattered through many collections and series at the RAC. The grant-in-aid provided me with adequate time to read closely and widely in a variety of collections, from which I was able to gain a broad understanding of how nuclear matters informed action, both within the state government and among average Americans. As I have completed my dissertation, these collections have added regional nuance to my nation-wide study while complementing the broader contours of civil defense history that I document as happening elsewhere in the country.

In writing my dissertation, I drew most heavily from the Nelson A. Rockefeller Gubernatorial Subject Files films, which were a rich source of grassroots civilian voices like those mentioned above. However, several series within Rockefeller's Gubernatorial Records were helpful to other aspects of my research as well. In particular, the Diane Van Wie and William J. Ronan series gave me a window into Governor Rockefeller's official civil defense platform. These files held speech

transcripts, policy documents, official correspondence, and position papers that illustrated the decision-making process behind state- and national-level civil defense planning from 1959 onward. For example, Governor Rockefeller gave a series of seminars and interviews in the early years of his governorship. These transcripts and notes provide excellent examples of not only how Rockefeller promoted the need for civil defense, but also the kinds of civic groups that were interested in hosting him for such events.⁶ The Ronan series also includes a run of civil defense annual reports, which were of particular importance for illustrating how the Rockefeller administration's policies translated into programs on the ground.

Nelson Rockefeller's interest in civil defense, however, predated his tenure as governor, and I found these records to be helpful examples even earlier in my dissertation's chronology. In the mid-1950s Nelson Rockefeller served on several defense advisory committees under President Dwight D. Eisenhower that reconsidered the role of the federal civil defense programs within the organization of government.⁷ I use such records to demonstrate that the Eisenhower administration continued to debate the functions of civil defense, even when public policy changes did not result from the discussions.

Other members of the Rockefeller family also took an interest in earlier civil defense planning, as well. David Rockefeller was involved in New York City civil defense planning for a time, and several of the family's charitable causes issued studies into nuclear protection.⁸ The Rockefellers also installed shelters at many of their family homes, and assured that their New York City offices had adequate civil defense plans.⁹ The records of the latter provide valuable examples of how large businesses approached civil defense planning independently of state agencies. Such corporate records are not typically found in public archives, and I was glad to have encountered this type of document at the RAC.

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Nelson A. Rockefeller's first years as New York's governor overlap important years of change in the public's perceptions of nuclear policies. By the end of the 1950s, public health concerns and the fear of war had begun to merge with a growing cynicism that nuclear survival—whether via civil defense or other means—might be impossible. For an increasing number of Americans, then, the only sustainable means for survival was peace. But peace, of course, was a nebulous term. At times peace meant disarmament, the abolition of weapons of mass destruction, or a weapons test ban. At other times peace meant restoring diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union or ending proxy conflicts. In all of these scenarios, however, nuclear weapons—the teeth to the Cold War conflict—were defined as the key problem. By the early 1960s, Americans increasingly expressed a vision of nuclear citizenship that renounced the nuclear entirely, calling for peace—not civil defense, nor deterrence—but peace as the antidote to the problem of survival in the Atomic Age.

Governor Rockefeller was a staunch advocate for civil defense throughout his many years in Albany, despite currents of change in public opinion. But because Rockefeller's civil defense policies encountered some degree of public pushback from the very start of his governorship, he served as a locus of public discussion. No other state-level leader was as widely associated with civil defense in this era both among supporters and opponents. As such, his personal and governing records offer a rare view into the connections between the federal government, a state official, and citizens. As Rockefeller's constituents debated the merits of fallout shelters and survival guides, they engaged in a broader national conversation that connected their individual lives to the survival of the nation as a whole under the stresses of the Cold War.

¹ Senator Brien McMahon of Connecticut speaking for the U.S. Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, Executive Session, Civil Defense, 81st Cong., 2d sess., February 23, 1950, 19, ProQuest (HRG-1950-AEJ-0050).

² Francis E. Csendes to Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, March 17, 1960, Reel 15, Subseries 1: First Administration, 1959-1962, Series 31.1: Office Subject Files, 1959-1973, FA439, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gubernatorial Records, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter referred to NARGR-RAC).

³ Bruce Hunt to Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, February 18, 1962, Reel 71, Subseries 1: First Administration, 1959-1962, Series 37.1: Office Subject Files, 1959-1973, FA439, NARGR-RAC.

⁴ "A Governor Says No to Atomic Shelters," *New York Post (Magazine)*, April 10, 1960. See also, for example, Darrell D. English to Governor Robert B. Meyner, April 1, 1960, Reel 15, Subseries 1: First Administration, 1959-62, Series 37.1: Office Subject Files, 1959-1973, FA439, NARGR-RAC.

⁵ See Series J.1: Politics – New York City Office, Subseries 5: Office of the Governor, Box 78, Folder 852-4, FA345, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁶ See Boxes 47, 48, 51, Subseries 6: Meetings, Luncheons, Dinners, Diane Van Wie, FA373, NARGR-RAC.

⁷ Volumes 35-6: Federal Civil Defense Administration, Subseries O_5C, President's Advisory Committee on Government Organization (PACGO), Series O, Washington DC, FA350, Nelson A. Rockefeller Personal Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter referred to NARPP-RAC).

⁸ Folder 52, Box 4, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, FA436, David Rockefeller Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center; and Folder 1215, Box 125, Series L, Projects, FA348, NARPP-RAC.

⁹ For family homes and properties see, Folder 95, Box 14, Subseries 1: Personal Papers, Series 3: Office and Home Files, FA108, John D. Rockefeller 3rd Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center; and Folder 174-9, Box 15; Folder 245, Box 20; and Folder 256, Box 21, Series K, Possessions, FA011, NARPP-RAC.

For New York City business offices, see Folder 280.33, Box 30; and Folder 2119, Box 210, Series L, Projects, FA348, NARPP-RAC; and Folder 782, Box 104, Series C: Business Interests, Investments: Rockefeller Center, Inc. (RCI), FA312, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.