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Media and Messages: Gender Roles as the Nuclear Family takes on the Nuclear Bomb

Throughout World War II, both the United States government and the private sector promised the people of the country that the sacrifices of war would be amply rewarded upon victory. For many white, middle class Americans this did come true. The men returned from war and the family moved into a roomy, suburban home. Women were expected to leave the workplace and take care of their husbands and children. Men and women alike were encouraged to shop and fill their new homes with consumer goods.

Yes, the United States had won the war. Factories were producing at high rates, Mom cooked and cleaned, Dad worked and protected the family, and the children were always smiling. As fine as life seemed, there was still a figurative cloud shadowing the country. Though World War II had ended, the Cold War had begun. An ally had become an enemy, and the nuclear family had to prepare for the nuclear bomb.

The United States military was charged with preventing a nuclear attack. In the event they were unsuccessful, the people of the United States had to be prepared to protect themselves from the effects of a bomb. Survival of the nuclear family would be paramount to the restoration of the country. The government's method of choice for protecting its citizens would become the fallout shelter.

Life in a fallout shelter ran contrary to the wartime and postwar messages Americans had been receiving. Shelters in public buildings would offer no privacy. Food in a shelter would have to be rationed. Luxuries would have to be left behind. Private home shelters would lack socialization. All of this was necessary, the government claimed, to protect democracy and our way of life, complete with the choice of so many consumer goods.

This paper will examine paradoxes of the Cold War era fallout shelters. While asking its citizens to prepare for a possible annihilation of life as they knew it, the United States promoted unequal roles for men and women. Though it was assumed men were the heads of families, or the responsible parties, the reality of civil defense preparations was that the bulk of the work belonged to women. The messages of men as protectors and women as homemakers entered the public discourse in many ways, including films and magazine articles. These media reveal that the guidelines to prepare families for nuclear fallout were more about protecting a cultural way of life than preserving their actual lives.