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Fallout Shelters: An American Dream

With the looming threat of a nuclear bomb attack, the United States government turned to the nuclear family as its showcase for demonstrating the inherent values of capitalism and democracy. The family that fit the mold would live in a suburban home, purchased with the assistance of federal loans to World War II veterans. Dad attended college on the GI bill and now commuted to his corporation job. His paycheck would supply the home with an abundance of consumer goods. Mom stayed home with the children, took care of the house, and generally attended to all of Dad's needs. Most likely, they would also be white.

Should the Soviet Union drop a nuclear bomb on the United States, parents and children would take up residence in a fallout shelter. By duplicating the roles below ground that they maintained above ground, Americans would survive to rebuild the country. The government and other publishers produced various instructions for surviving both the initial attack and the following radioactive fallout. Whether in print or on film, inequalities between the roles of men and women were quite noticeable.

This paper will focus on the differences between men and women's roles in American society, particularly on the light that shelter instructions shed on Cold War

gender roles. The roles were far from equal, dreamed up by the American government as a way of keeping its citizens politically in line. Men were the heads of families, but the reality of recommended civil defense preparations assigned the bulk of the labor to women. Once families took refuge in their shelters, men were to assume the roles of boss and protector while mothers were to continue specializing in childcare and homemaking. This message was quite visible in films and publications of the day. These media, now readily available on the Internet, reveal that the guidelines to prepare families for nuclear fallout were much more about protecting the American government's dream of traditional family values than preserving their actual lives.