

In the Shadow of the Bomb's Apocalypse:

American Culture in the Nuclear Era,

1957 – 1963

Eugene M. Henry

A Thesis in the Department of History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts (History) at Concordia University,

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

July 2007

© Eugene M. Henry, 2007



Library and  
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et  
Archives Canada

Published Heritage  
Branch

Direction du  
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada

*Your file    Votre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-34750-8*

*Our file    Notre référence*

*ISBN: 978-0-494-34750-8*

#### NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

#### AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

---

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

  
**Canada**

**Abstract**

**In the Shadow of the Bomb's Apocalypse:  
American Culture in the Nuclear Era, 1957 – 1963**

Eugene M. Henry

The period beginning with the launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in October 1957 up to the adoption of the Limited Test Ban in the fall of 1963 was an era marked with intense fear and uncertainty.

The American mainstream print media and prophetic writers from premillennial journals employed apocalyptic narrative structures when exploring nuclear issues. These distinct discourses developed through the utilization of traditional apocalyptic motifs to reconcile the existence and horrific potential of nuclear weapons. This thread is evident in both traditionally biblical forms, as well as a unique secular apocalyptic strain.

This thesis argues that in a time of fear and uncertainty, when the specter of nuclear war cast its foreboding shadow on everyday life, Americans turned to a well-established apocalyptic discourse to explain and understand the exigencies of their time.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction and Historiography.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Meeting Jesus in a Mushroom Cloud.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Chapter 2: The Fallout Shelter Debate: Rising From the Ashes of Nuclear War, or, Obliterated by the Holocaust.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Thinking About the Unthinkable.....</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>102</b>

## Introduction and Historiography:

If the radiance of a thousand suns  
 Were to burst at once into the sky,  
 That would be like the splendor of the Mighty One...  
 I am become Death  
 The shatterer of worlds.<sup>1</sup>

Observing the first successful nuclear explosion on July 16, 1945, J. Robert Oppenheimer was compelled to speak these words from the Hindi *Bhagavad-Gita*. I have opened with Oppenheimer's famous quotation, not because it is obligatory to open a study on nuclear weapons with the tormented prophecy of an agonized nuclear scientist – although many studies do indeed begin this way<sup>2</sup> – but to observe a departure in thinking about nuclear weapons. It has been over 60 years since the Trinity test and Oppenheimer's words no longer resonate with the American perception of nuclear reality. Many regard the bomb as a relic of some forgotten time, and tend to look at moments in American history when fear of nuclear war represented a clear and present danger as times of unwarranted anxiety. Undeniably, the American experience with nuclear weapons has not been uniform. Historian Paul Boyer writes, "Americans' long, troubled encounter with nuclear weapons had been cyclical, with episodes of intense political

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Robert Oppenheimer in Robert W. Malcolmson, *Nuclear Fallacies: How We Have Been Misguided Since Hiroshima* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a number of studies on the history of nuclear weapons utilize famous quotations from atomic scientists. This reflects a discursive trend that views the bomb as a revolutionary break in the history of weapons. It reinforces the notion of nuclear weapons as a completely 'new' phenomenon and also visualizes nuclear weapons as a quasi-divine force unleashed by humanity. This will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

activism and cultural attention alternating with intervals of apparent neglect.”<sup>3</sup> I will focus on the period beginning with the launch of Sputnik in 1957, to the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963. This was a time of intense anxiety and fear. The combination of a tense international situation and ever-more destructive thermonuclear weapons – deliverable in minutes by ICBMs – led to numerous eschatological speculations and prophecies in the media. In confronting the bomb and the possibility of nuclear war, cultural representations conformed to an existing apocalyptic discourse. This discursive thread, manifested by representations of both biblical and secular apocalyptic forms, dominated writing on nuclear issues in this period.

The launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik in October of 1957 began a new era of thinking about nuclear war. The Soviets had beaten the Americans to space, which was in itself a significant Cold War defeat. The concern that the Soviet Union led the United States in technological development had been a refrain throughout the 1950s; for many, Sputnik confirmed these fears. One commentator noted that “The BEEP-BEEP of Sputnik came through the radio receivers of the world as no surprise to those who have been following the announced satellite plans here and abroad.” But there were elements of surprise, including “the reported size and weight of Sputnik and the psychological effect the launching seems to have had on world chancelleries.”<sup>4</sup> Eugene Rabinowitch, editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, articulated some of these fears: “What matters is the capacity for launching nuclear missiles at targets anywhere on the globe. The Soviet successes so far make it likely that this capacity will be acquired by the Soviet

---

<sup>3</sup> Paul Boyer, *By the Bombs Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. x.

<sup>4</sup> Harlow Shapley, “Moonstruck U.S.A.: Satellite Hysteria,” *The Nation*, October 26, 1957, p. 276.

Union ahead of America.”<sup>5</sup> Although Soviet long-range bombers were conceivably able to reach targets inside the United States, intercontinental missiles ended a long held sense of geographic security. The image of a nation protected from hostile incursions by two massive oceans immediately vanished with the launch of Sputnik.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Sputnik woke the American public from “its undogmatic slumbers,” ranking “with the shots at Lexington or Fort Sumter” in significance.<sup>7</sup>

After the Sputnik scare, a number of crises and panics followed, including the Berlin Crisis in the summer of 1961, the fallout shelter and civil defense furor begun in the late 1950s and reaching its apogee in late 1961, and the Cuban missile crisis in October of 1962. All of these events unfolded in an already tense Cold War climate. At the heart of each of these crises was the overwhelming shadow of nuclear war. Furthermore, intensified fears provoked eschatological pronouncements, prophecies and predictions in various cultural representations, especially in print media. This period of heightened anxiety abruptly ended following the safe resolution of the Cuban missile crisis and the détente of the limited test ban treaty in 1963.

This thesis argues that in a time of fear and uncertainty, when the specter of nuclear war cast its foreboding shadow on everyday life, Americans turned to a well-established apocalyptic discourse to explain and understand the exigencies of their time. This is evident by analyzing two separate but related apocalyptic styles. On the one hand, the followers of the conservative evangelical premillennial dispensationalists were

---

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Rabinowitch, “After Missiles and Satellites, What?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1957, p. 346.

<sup>6</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, *The Bomb: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 216.

<sup>7</sup> D.W. Brogan in Michael S. Sherry, *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

inheritors of an American prophetic tradition and easily incorporated nuclear issues into their strictly biblical apocalyptic framework. But the debate about fallout shelters and the many different predictions on nuclear war also reflected a secular apocalyptic discourse that emerged in mainstream media writing on nuclear issues. This secular apocalyptic discourse had both redemptive and fatalistic elements, and used language and theory that situated it firmly in the broader American apocalyptic tradition. Modern science operated as a semi-divine force in this period, replacing religion as the main interpreter of the natural world. However, science could not adequately predict the fate of a civilization vulnerable to nuclear weapons. As a result, many scientists became the prophets of cosmic doom, and turned to an apocalyptic narrative to predict the future. This trend was echoed by journalists, government officials, and lay commentators, all of whom contributed to the secular apocalyptic narrative evident in American media between 1957 and 1963.

This distinct discourse utilized traditional apocalyptic motifs to reconcile the existence and horrific potential of nuclear weapons. This thread is evident in both traditionally biblical forms, as well as a unique secular apocalyptic strain. There was no significant – or at least explicit – interaction between biblical apocalyptic discourse and its concurrent secular counterpart. However, what is evident is that by analyzing two separate and seemingly unrelated discursive approaches which pondered the catastrophic potential of the nuclear bomb, similar methods were used that conformed to traditional apocalyptic norms.

By analyzing the arguments and theories of premillennial dispensationalists, I will explain the distinct and formulaic structure of biblical apocalyptic prophecy. In addition,



I examine how these theorists incorporated the discovery and devastating potential of nuclear weapons in their prophetic framework. Premillennials believed that the present age was doomed and that no human action could prevent that fate. However, they took solace in their unwavering belief that they would be saved by the imminent return of their lord at the end of time. Although the American premillennials had little influence on the secular apocalyptic discourse of this period, they did not operate in a bubble. The same forces shaping American culture influenced them.<sup>8</sup> Examining the premillennial dispensationalists' reactions to the nuclear age is useful when analyzing the comparative apocalyptic motifs evident in the secular narrative. Secular apocalyptic visions represent a departure from traditional biblical apocalypticism, but they share common themes and ancestry. Although the secular apocalyptic discourse did not reference a divine cosmic force – the Christian God – there are similarities in both language and theory. I look at a number of sources that clearly outline the premillennial discourse. Interdenominational conservative evangelical journals, such as *Christianity Today*, *Moody Monthly*, and the *Sunday School Times*, all look at contemporary events through the lens of prophecy. I will also examine a popular prophecy book of the time, M.R. DeHaan's *Coming Events in Prophecy*.

Turning to subsequent chapters that analyze the secular apocalyptic discourse in mainstream media writing on nuclear issues, it is important to include sources that had wide readership. *Time*, *Life*, *The New York Times*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, and the *Reader's Digest* satisfy those requirements. It is also important to

---

<sup>8</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 43.

look at the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, as it was a journal that the popular magazines and newspapers turned to for information on nuclear developments, and featured its writers as guest commentators. Furthermore, I look to texts that influenced and shaped the secular apocalyptic narrative, including Herman Kahn's frightening and widely-cited manifesto, *On Thermonuclear War*, and the best-selling novels, *On the Beach* and *Fail-Safe*.

During this period, an apocalyptic discourse that was spawned by thinking about the bomb significantly influenced American society. However, it is not my goal to force uniform assumptions upon American culture as a whole. It is problematic to assume that whole cultures, in this case American culture, have psyches.<sup>9</sup> There exist too many strains, positions, and categories of thought operating at any given time. Furthermore, it is difficult to gauge the apocalyptic temper of the American public at large, because within the American public there were contending and intersecting histories which produced variant cultural perceptions, making impracticable any attempt at coming to unanimous conclusions. For example, an article from *Life* magazine published five months after the launch of Sputnik, cited a survey that challenged the prevailing assumption that Americans were in a state of panic. The article compared the American reaction to Sputnik to "Damocles at his banquet and [Americans] discovered something far more ominous than a sword hanging over them.... [T]he shining legend of American technological superiority began to tarnish before the eyes of the world."<sup>10</sup> But, the author interviewed average Americans, and found a variety of concerns unrelated to nuclear war and Soviet technological superiority. A sawmill operator said, "Those space satellites are

---

<sup>9</sup> Jeff Smith, *Unthinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> Paul O'Neil, "U.S. Change of Mind," *Life*, March 3, 1958, p. 91.

nothing to worry about. I don't think we're going to have a war with Russia – we're going to have a war right here with the Negroes.”<sup>11</sup> A farmer was unfazed because of his faith that God was on the American side: “I don't think there's very much danger now of an all-out war, but if it did happen I think we would lick them all right. I simply don't believe the Lord would permit those Russians to come over here and take everything.” Between 1957 and 1963, there were a number of dissenting articles that attempted to shift the discourse on nuclear war away from the prophetic and apocalyptic trend.<sup>12</sup>

There is a significant amount of scholarship on millenarianism available to the student of apocalypse. However, as Damian Thompson correctly observes, “All millenarianism is apocalyptic, but all apocalyptic belief is not millenarian.”<sup>13</sup> However, the scholarship on secular apocalypticism is not nearly as well developed as scholarship on millennialism. The pioneer of millennial scholarship, Norman Cohn, wrote *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* in 1957, tracing the proliferation of millennialism in medieval society in the subculture of lower class popular religion.<sup>14</sup> A later study of medieval millennialism,

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Of all the sources analyzed in this study, both *Life* and *Time* magazine, Henry Luce publications, were the most prevalent in attempting to allay nuclear fears. In particular, the Office of Civil Defense Mobilization found an ally in *Life* for its promotion of the controversial and heavily debated fallout shelter program. In September of 1961, *Life* published a cover story praising the fallout shelter program that assured its readers that 97 % of the population would be saved if an effective fallout shelter system were built. These claims attracted widespread criticism. For example, in his criticism of the fallout shelter program, *Nation* commentator Roger Hagan argued that “The OCDM and *Life* magazine kids” American citizens. (Roger Hagan, “Shelters: When The Holocaust Comes.” *The Nation*, November 4, 1961, p. 343) This is an example of a media outlet with alliances to the government, and one wary of apocalyptic prognostications. This trend was more common in *Life* than *Time*, as *Time* magazine often published articles which fit into the apocalyptic discursive trend. For further discussion, see: Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), pp. 81-85.

<sup>13</sup> Damian Thompson, *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), p. xiv.

<sup>14</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

which is equally useful, is Bernard McGinn's *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*. McGinn clearly situates millennialism as an important mode of thinking, effecting all levels of medieval society.<sup>15</sup> These early studies are essential as they provide a theoretical framework transferable to other periods. The most useful study of modern American millennial thought is Paul Boyer's *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, which traces the ancient roots of millennialism and follows its development through the middle ages, to the Puritan founders, through twentieth-century manifestations of the biblical apocalyptic.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the existence of a number of well-respected studies of millenarianism, many scholars complain that it is not accorded the deference and attention it deserves. The lay commentator Alex Heard notes, "Much of the scholarship and skeptical commentary I've read treats millennialism as, essentially, a form of popular insanity, a disease, one that usually has dire consequences."<sup>17</sup> Apocalyptic thinking is an influential and continuous means of conceptualizing the world, as studies that follow its roots through the history of Western civilization have observed, and I believe, proven. However, according to Daniel Wojcik, "scholars have largely neglected the study of contemporary endtimes thought."<sup>18</sup> In considering the reasons for this apparent neglect,

---

<sup>15</sup> Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 10-12.

<sup>16</sup> Boyer's study examines the traditional Judeo-Christian roots of apocalyptic belief. His analysis of nineteenth century American apocalypticism is admirable in its diverse examination of variant manifestations of American apocalyptic and millennial belief. Boyer's treatment of the twentieth century focuses specifically on the post-war exertions of populizers of the premillennial dispensational system of belief. As this is his specific focus, he does not examine other apocalyptic movements or discourse of that century, though he does study the effects of premillennial dispensationalism on the broader public discourse. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> Alex Heard, *Apocalypse Pretty Soon: Travels in End-Time America* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 3.

one salient factor is the fact that all apocalyptic and millennial predictions are proved false by the passage of time. For example, William Miller, the founder of Seventh Day Adventism, or Charles Taze Russell's Jehovah's Witnesses, both set firm dates in the near future for the apocalypse. When the apocalypse did not materialize, millennial furor appeared foolish and ignorant and the movements' believers were forced to lamely explain away errors in prophecy. Modern scholarship's devotion to rationalism and objectivity leads – in varying extents – to the trivialization of apocalyptic belief in the historical record. The historian Richard Landes notes, “Accordingly, religious *and* secular historians alike have written a largely millennium-free history of the West, making millennialism a twice-untold tale, relegating it to the status of a recondite sideshow, largely ignored by serious scholars.”<sup>19</sup> Often scholars are unsure of how to situate prophecy believers in history, religious or secular, whether they belong on “the fringe or in a troubled mainstream.”<sup>20</sup> The difficulty is the temptation to “superimpose static understanding over a dynamic and elusive phenomenon that exists for many not as a separate culture, but as a fiber that has woven itself into the fabric of American religion and culture more pervasively than many observers realize.”<sup>21</sup> Whatever the reason, students of historical apocalypticism do not believe that recent scholarship, apart from medieval historiography, engages modern apocalyptic thought comprehensively and adequately.

To understand the theoretical framework of apocalyptic discourse, it is important to recognize the continuity of apocalyptic thought in the history of modern Western

---

<sup>19</sup> Richard Landes, “The Fruitful Error: Reconsidering Millennial Enthusiasm,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32: 1 (Summer, 2001), p. 90.

<sup>20</sup> Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

civilization. Apocalyptic movements, or periods when apocalyptic discourse is pervasive in a society, cannot be analyzed in isolation. Bernard McGinn recognizes “that apocalypticism cannot be understood only as a series of movements with discrete and identifiable causes in historical events.” Instead, it “must also be seen as a tradition, a textually embodied community of discourse founded in the accepted canon of Western sacred Scripture and occasionally augmented by the production of new revelations and interpretive strategies.”<sup>22</sup> Apocalyptic texts from different eras exhibit a number of common elements. For McGinn, these represent an apocalyptic ‘minimum.’ The foremost of these familial traits of apocalyptic movements is that “history is conceived as a predetermined totality; pessimism about the present and conviction of its imminent crisis; and belief in the proximate judgment of evil and triumph of good.”<sup>23</sup> These are indeed true of most apocalyptic movements. However, the modern American secular apocalyptic that I observe in writing on nuclear issues in my source material complicates these definitions. The conception of history as a linear predetermined totality is at work, although rationalizing about the nature of temporality complicates the traditional biblical belief in a chronology decided by the divine. In addition, within the secular apocalyptic there were different conceptual strains, two of which I analyze as fatalism and redemption.

Stephen O’Leary argues that apocalyptic arguments have maintained their relevancy in contemporary America, not because they have “proved their validity by withstanding the test of time,”<sup>24</sup> but because of their ability “to survive the repeated

---

<sup>22</sup> McGinn, p. 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 17.

disconfirmations of time's passage by a process of discursive reformulation that continually ties apocalypse to the present by reconceiving the relationship of past and future."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, apocalypticism is a dynamic discourse and its elasticity is evident in the multiplicity of forms it can take. Despite the variant manifestations of apocalyptic discourse, it has its constants, and cultural representations from Sputnik to the Test Ban conform to an extant apocalyptic framework. That is to say, although there are different interpretations and readings of nuclear eschatology, they are beholden to a traditional apocalyptic structure, albeit a flexible one. Therefore, I believe that definitions that consider apocalypse exclusively as a mode of thought based strictly on divine revelation and biblical cosmologies are too restrictive. They deny the influence of reinterpreted apocalyptic narratives, influenced by their biblical predecessors (and contemporaries<sup>26</sup>), which are essentially secular in form. I argue that a distinct secular apocalyptic discourse emerged in the mainstream American media's treatment of nuclear topics, especially manifestations of nuclear fear and musings on the annihilative potential of nuclear war in these sources.

A number of scholarly approaches to apocalyptic thinking, as Tom Thatcher notes, "have focused on the sociological environments that produce millenarian movements, treating apocalyptic rhetoric as a means of relieving social tension."<sup>27</sup> Seeking to rationalize a chaotic present, apocalyptic movements look to an apocalyptic

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to examine the influence of postwar biblical apocalypticism on secular apocalyptic narratives. Although the secular apocalyptic often appropriated biblical prophetic language, e.g., words like 'Armageddon,' 'judgment,' 'revelation,' etc., it did not engage with the contemporary biblical apocalypticism in any significant way. Although both biblical and secular apocalyptic narrative factored nuclear weapons into their prophetic framework, the method in doing so was either distinctly 'biblical,' or distinctly 'secular,' with little interfacing.

<sup>27</sup> Tom Thatcher, "Empty Metaphors and Apocalyptic Rhetoric," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 3. (Autumn, 1998), p. 556.

future. This is indeed true in this study, as nuclear fear was transferred to ideas of a redemptive apocalypse, or resignation to a fatalistic one. However, it is too simplistic to explain apocalyptic discourse purely in terms of relief sought in the face of social chaos or ubiquitous uncertainty. Stephen J. Stein outlined a “new architectonic” of American apocalypse, which is useful for this study. He observed a number of shared elements of American apocalyptic movements, and explained that “apocalyptic texts, images and symbols possess an amazing plasticity that invites and reinforces interpretation and reinterpretation; American apocalypse has a derivative character because it draws on texts and traditions much older than American society; and Religious apocalypticism and secular apocalypticism exist with a measured symbiotic relationship.”<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Stein argues that “the most useful categories for dealing with apocalypticism in the American historical experience are ‘religious apocalypticism’ and ‘secular apocalypticism.’”<sup>29</sup> I agree with this division. In my analysis of the effect of nuclear issues on American apocalyptic thought in the late 1950s and early 1960s, I will analyze how these two categories of apocalypticism reacted to these issues and intersected. Indeed, my analysis of premillennial dispensationalists’ discourse on nuclear issues demonstrates a clear-cut biblical apocalypticism, one that was self-reflexively millennial. Through analyzing the dispensationalists’ discursive structure, I can effectively show by comparison the existence of a secular apocalypticism in mainstream American culture’s treatment of nuclear issues – a structure that does not explicitly utilize religious

---

<sup>28</sup> Stephen J. Stein, “10 American Millennial Visions: Towards Construction of a New Architectonic of American Apocalypticism” in Abbas Amanat & Magnus Bernhardsson (eds.), *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America* (New York, I.B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 191-192.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 207.



structures, but is as much an inheritor of traditional millennial thought as the dispensationalists.

Scholarship on the nuclear apocalyptic is even less extensive than work on modern apocalypticism in general. A number of scholars note the relevancy of nuclear weapons on apocalyptic thought, although few delve into the subject significantly. For example, Damian Thompson observes, “The invention of the atom bomb at the end of the Second World War had a galvanizing effect on End-Time belief. It transformed the concept of worldwide destruction from a traditional End-Time image accessible only to believers into a frightening possibility accessible to everyone.”<sup>30</sup> The scholar Abbas Amanat recognizes that grafting of nuclear weapons to apocalyptic belief demonstrates that “ancient fears and hopes could be transported placidly and effectively into a new setting and exploited for political and ideological ends, or for greater coexistence, [which] testifies to the potency of apocalyptic motifs and their endurance in the face of a seemingly secularizing age.”<sup>31</sup> Other surveys of American culture in the 1950s and 1960s, which are not focused on apocalyptic thought, only briefly mention the nuclear apocalypticism without situating it in a broader context of eschatological thought.<sup>32</sup>

Paul Boyer’s study, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture*, is extremely useful for its analysis of nuclear issues in a religious

---

<sup>30</sup> Thompson, p. 133.

<sup>31</sup> Abbas Amanat, “Introduction: Apocalyptic Anxieties and Millennial Hopes in the Salvation Religions of the Middle East” in Abbas Amanat & Magnus Bernhardsson, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> For example, in Todd Gitlin’s survey of the 1960s, he notes that “the first American generation compelled from its infancy to fear not only war but the end of days.... [W]e could never quite take for granted that the world we had been born into was destined to endure.” He also notes the inherent apocalypticism of the Students for a Democratic Society’s Port Huron Statement. He cites the Statement: “Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living.” However, Gitlin does not identify these as part of any broader discursive trend. This is an example of scholarship that recognizes a feeling of doom in this period without articulating it structurally. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam, 1987), pp. 97-113.

apocalyptic context, but is not concerned with the secular apocalyptic. The most extensive study that focuses on how the prospect of nuclear annihilation influenced modern American apocalyptic thought is Daniel Wojcik's *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. Wojcik's study is well researched and he successfully argues that "secular doomsday speculation ... related to fears about nuclear annihilation, pervades contemporary American literature, art, music, popular culture, and folklore."<sup>33</sup> However, Wojcik contends, "most secular beliefs about imminent apocalypse are devoid of the component of worldly redemption and therefore tend to be characterized by a sense of hopelessness and despair."<sup>34</sup> His adherence to fatalism in describing the secular apocalyptic is limiting. By reducing his analysis of secular apocalypticism to hopelessness and fatalism he ignores the redemptive elements of the discourse. Forms of secular apocalypticism operating in this period did in fact have redemptive elements. As I will argue later, one distinct version of secular apocalypticism believed that a nuclear cataclysm could be followed by regeneration. This is most evident in the fallout shelter debate; proponents of fallout shelters and civil defense believed in a redemptive version of apocalypse whereby the American nation would be born anew from the rubble of nuclear holocaust.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, both religious and secular apocalyptic discourses developed in the climate of nuclear fear and anxiety. Chapter One will analyze the distinct biblical apocalypticism of American evangelical premillennial dispensationalists, specifically analyzing the role they accorded nuclear weapons to their prophetic framework. The premillennials believed that their redemption was coming in

---

<sup>33</sup> Wojcik, p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 4.

God's imminent apocalypse, which gave them solace in what they perceived was an otherwise doomed world. This allowed them to transform the uncertain and fearful nuclear age into a time of patient hope for the coming of their Lord. There were also common apocalyptic motifs in secular American culture. Chapter Two examines the fallout shelter in American culture, and how the debate over fallout shelters and civil defense was framed in apocalyptic terms. The fallout shelter debate produced both fatalistic and redemptive pronouncements, which shed light on the broader discursive trend of the secular apocalyptic in American culture. In addition to fallout shelters, the fear and uncertainty of the nuclear age manifested itself in other forms and narrative structures. Chapter Three contains a detailed survey of various manifestations of apocalypticism in nuclear predictions and eschatological cultural representations. Similar to the fallout shelter debate, a variety of arguments are analyzed as parts of a secular apocalyptic framework. I will conclude with a brief analysis of the continued relevance of apocalyptic discourse in contemporary American society.

## Chapter 1: Meeting Jesus in a Mushroom Cloud

Premillennial Dispensationalists in the nuclear age adapted contemporary events to their traditional biblical prophetic framework. The fears of the nuclear age and the cataclysmic potential of nuclear weapons offered believers proof that the millennium was upon them, and only evangelism could save a doomed world from the coming apocalypse. Apocalyptic and millennial thought, traced throughout the course of American history, reveals a startling consistency in public consciousness. It is evident in the writings and jeremiads of the early New England puritans, whose apocalypticism was already an embedded element of their thinking carried from the Old World.<sup>1</sup> It continued on, exemplified by the postmillennialism of the revivalist Jonathan Edwards in the 1730s and 1740s and the early example of William Miller's premillennialism in the 1830s and 1840s.

In the nineteenth century, there were various interpretations and manifestations of apocalyptic thought; they ranged from the cautious postmillennialism of the antebellum reform movements to the development of premillennial dispensationalism in the latter half of the century. Postmillennialists believed that the millennium would come before the second coming of Christ. It was a positive view that sought to create a peaceful kingdom on earth through piety, goodwill, and righteousness. Premillennialism believed that things would only get worse and civilization would decline until Christ came and

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen J. Stein in Abbas & Bernhardsson, p. 193. For an excellent study of the role of the Puritan Jeremiad in American history, and in particular, its millennial content, see: Sacvan Bercovich, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978).

instituted His reign on earth. The history of this latter phenomenon is critical to the subject of my thesis because it became the dominant source for conservative evangelical Protestant eschatology in the mid-twentieth century. Premillennial dispensationalism was a system of belief developed in conservative evangelical circles that insisted that God's earthly millennium would come after the Second Coming of Christ.

The key figure in developing dispensationalism<sup>2</sup> was John Nelson Darby, the English founder of the Plymouth Brethren. Darby looked to biblical prophecy to determine that God had patterned the history of humanity through a series of dispensations. Each of the seven dispensations, or eras, was characterized by a different means to salvation.<sup>3</sup> The previous dispensation had ended with Jesus' crucifixion, the next would begin with the Rapture, or translation of the church.<sup>4</sup> Darby taught that the present dispensation was the dispensation of grace, or the Church Age. Following the Rapture, where members of the true church would be caught up in the air with Jesus, came the tribulation, or "God's day of wrath," when those left behind would have to contend with "destruction, violence, bloodshed and terror without precedent."<sup>5</sup> After the tribulation, Darby claimed, the Battle of Armageddon, an equally bloody affair led by the antichrist, would end with Jesus' sudden descent from heaven with armies of saints who

---

<sup>2</sup> Premillennialism had existed in various forms from as early as the teachings of the Calabrian monk Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century. For a detailed examination of early manifestations of premillennialism see: Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970); Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 87.

<sup>4</sup> The other dispensations were: the dispensation of innocence, the period preceding Adam's fall; the dispensation of conscience, from Adam's fall to the time of Noah; the dispensation of government from Noah to Abraham; the dispensation of patriarchal rule, from Abraham to Moses; the dispensation of Mosaic law, from Moses to Christ. These are followed by the current dispensation of grace, or church age, and finally by the forthcoming millennial kingdom.

<sup>5</sup> M.R. DeHaan, *Coming Events in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 17.

would destroy the armies of Satan. The millennial kingdom on earth would be established for a thousand years, followed by the final judgment, and, for all intents and purposes, the end of history.<sup>6</sup> Darby incorporated this prophetic structure into a “cohesive system that he buttressed at every point by copious biblical proof texts,”<sup>7</sup> and widely disseminated his ideas through his teachings and writings.

Dispensationalism took hold in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries when conservative Protestants reacted to modernist and liberal theological challenges to the inerrancy of the Bible by adopting the strict scriptural formulaic of premillennialism. “Modernism interpreted the Bible through the lens of human history” while dispensationalism “interpreted history exclusively through the lens of Scripture.”<sup>8</sup> The dispensationalist discourse was further strengthened by the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. Cyrus Scofield was an integral figure in solidifying the movement, as his reference Bible served as an integral tool for prophecy writers during the twentieth century, and his Bible sold over 5 million copies from its publication to 1967.<sup>9</sup>

From its 19<sup>th</sup>-century origins through to the late 1950s, premillennial dispensationalism both grew in support among fundamentalist evangelicals and grew apart from liberal Protestantism. It focused on prophetic discourse and, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter, interpreted contemporary events through a prophetic

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 17-19. There are divisions among premillennial dispensationalism. Since its inception as an American facet of fundamentalism, premillennials have debated the timing of the Rapture. The dominant school believes that the Rapture will come before the Tribulation, therefore sparing members of Christ’s true Church the agonies of the Tribulation; these are the pre-Tribulationists. The other permutation believes that the Rapture will occur after the Tribulation, these are the post-Tribulationists.

<sup>7</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 101.

and apocalyptic lens. The central tenet of premillennialism was that the present age was doomed, and no action, whether it was social or political, could rescue humanity. Rather, the only hope lay in waiting for the Second Coming. The only constructive action taken by dispensationalists was to evangelize and save souls in an attempt to rescue the unsaved from the horrors of the Tribulation.

Dispensationalism was a strain of evangelical thought that was available to anyone interested in eschatology. It was interdenominational, although rank and file dispensationalists were generally composed of members from “fundamentalist” organizations. While not all conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists were premillennial dispensationalists, few premillennials did not have ties to the fundamentalist movement. The fundamentalists firmly believed in the need for an inerrant reading of Scripture. Therefore, a premillennial interpretation of scripture was required that demanded “attention to its ‘inerrant’ prophecy alongside its inerrant history, science and moral teaching.”<sup>10</sup> In the late nineteenth century, premillennial dispensationalists’ primary means of organizing and disseminating their prophetic ideas was through annual or semi-annual prophecy conferences and revivals.<sup>11</sup> These conferences continued to be relevant in the post-WWII period. However, by the mid-twentieth century, dispensationalists found new and more effective ways to unite their supporters. A significant fundamentalist centre of activity was the Fuller Theological Seminary in California, founded in 1947. It was composed of former members of other evangelical organizations. The new staff included Wilbur M. Smith from the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and Everett Harrison from the Dallas Theological Seminary.

---

<sup>10</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, “North American Protestant Fundamentalism,” in Linda Kintz & Julie Lesage, (eds.) *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 62.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

As Robert Wuthnow contends, Fuller Theological Seminary “helped forge a tighter national network among previously isolated centers of evangelical activity” by “recruiting faculty, administrators, and trustees from evangelical organizations nationwide.” These recruits maintained a close relationship with their former organizations “thereby forming the nucleus of a much broader network.”<sup>12</sup>

Between 1957 and 1963 the two most prominent premillennial dispensationalists were Wilbur M. Smith and M.R. DeHaan. Smith was a frequent contributor to the interdenominational dispensationalist journal *Moody Monthly*, and he prepared a manual for Sunday school teachers that he updated annually. He was well known both for his membership in the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and the Fuller Theological Seminary in California. DeHaan’s radio show “Radio Bible Class,” which aired on 500 stations across the U.S., including the Mutual and ABC networks, allowed him significant reach.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the growing prominence of fundamentalist movements, mainstream media outlets, while by no means devoid of apocalyptic discourse, did not cover premillennial dispensationalism in any significant way in the late fifties and early sixties. Even with the burgeoning popularity of fundamentalist prophetic discourse, the secular media ignored that strain in its writings on American evangelicalism. When treating conservative protestant denominations that studied and preached biblical prophecy the media tended to gloss over, or intentionally ignore, the specifics of their apocalyptic discourse. An article that appeared in *Life* in 1958 serves as an example. It described the “third force” in American Christianity as “made up of groups sometimes called ‘fringe

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 174.

<sup>13</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 124



sects' – those marked, in the extreme, by shouting revivalists, puritanical preachers of doomsday, faith healers, jazzy gospel singers."<sup>14</sup> The article lumped Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, and other independent Protestant organizations in the same "radical" category. While acknowledging that "A major reason for this amazing growth is the group's obedience to Christ's injunction: 'You shall be my witness to the ends of the earth,'"<sup>15</sup> it failed to analyze the specifics of their eschatology, or attempted to categorize and delineate the group's variant approaches to biblical apocalypticism. Rather, it described their proselytizing and evangelism as a product of the "strong sense of urgency, certain that the second coming of Christ is terribly near."<sup>16</sup>

In other examples, the media characterized Christian eschatology in even vaguer terms. An editorial in *Life* explained the Christian view of history in eschatological terms, but with no mention of any specific prophetic doctrine. It argued that "Of all the religions that have explained man to himself, the most enmeshed in human history is Christianity.... [I]t gives the whole human narrative a beginning, a center and an end."<sup>17</sup> Articles such as these clearly acknowledged the prophetic tradition in Christianity, but they did not engage with contemporary manifestations of that narrative. Instead, the author posited that "God who created this world, will some day end its story,"<sup>18</sup> but did not situate the tenet specifically in current American religious belief.

The mainstream media expansively chronicled the exploits of the most renowned American evangelical of the time, Billy Graham. Graham's crusade sought to appeal to Christians of all stripes and assured followers that "The coming of the Lord draweth

---

<sup>14</sup> "The Third Force in Christendom," *Life*, June 9, 1958, p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 119.

<sup>17</sup> "Space, History and God," *Life*, April 7, 1958, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

nigh.”<sup>19</sup> However, Graham’s eschatological orientation was not a common topic for discussion in media coverage of his crusade. By the early 1960s Graham’s efforts to broaden his appeal left little room for affinity to fundamentalism of any stripe, let alone premillennialism. This was evident not only by Graham’s increasingly ‘centrist’ evangelicalism, but was represented also by fundamentalists’ critiques of his ministry:

Dr. Bob Jones has been quoted as saying that ‘Billy Graham has done more harm to the cause of Christ than any man in history. He accuses Mr. Graham of watering down orthodoxy to please liberals and modernists ... leaving converts to find their own churches, whether it be modernist, fundamentalist, or middle ground.’<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, evidence from the mainstream media recognized that Graham was not part of the fundamentalist camp, “The fundamentalists no longer claim the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham, who in their eyes is now an out-and-out evangelical.”<sup>21</sup> However, as Paul Boyer argues,

While his sermons and books did not heavily emphasize prophecy, Graham clearly embraced premillennialism. Christ’s kingdom would arise from the ruins of earthly institutions, he proclaimed in *World Aflame* (1965): “Secular History ... is doomed.... The whole world is hurtling toward a war greater than anything known before.” Acknowledging his debt to Wilbur Smith, Graham speculated that the melting elements and “fervent heat” of II Peter referred to atomic fission, as God used nuclear means for Earth’s “Purification.”<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Isserman & Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 251.

<sup>20</sup> Harold H. Martin, “A Vivid Portrait of the Famous Revivalist Billy Graham,” *Saturday Evening Post*, April 13, 1963, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> George Dugan, “3<sup>rd</sup> Force Rises For Protestants,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1962, p. 66.

<sup>22</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 139.

Graham, although an extremely important figure in American evangelicalism, was not a strict adherent to premillennial dispensationalism. Prophecy did figure in his approach to theology, but its role was small, which is a fact attributable to his desire to appeal to the largest audience possible and his distancing himself from hardcore fundamentalism. Undeniably, there are examples in the sources that illuminate Graham's own eschatology. One article described Graham as coming "at a time when men were frightened.... Two world wars and a great depression had destroyed their bright illusion that man by his own virtues could create the Kingdom of God on earth."<sup>23</sup> Whether wittingly or unwittingly, this article clearly positioned Graham in the premillennial camp, as far as recognizing a central premillennial tenet: it is not possible for man to achieve the millennium on earth; achieving an earthly millennium before Christ's coming is a postmillennial view that is anathema to premillennial dispensationalists. This article also presented an idea of Graham's prophetic belief and quoted him, "He will come again in glory to judge the world. But I don't try to predict the day and hour of His coming."<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, Graham's eschatology is apparent in the mainstream media on a number of occasions. These examples include general signs-of-the-times type warnings: "'To stop the world from committing suicide', he proposed that American citizens 'put on the biggest sales drive in history' on behalf of moral values and faith in God."<sup>25</sup> They also include his concerns over specific events, such as the following, which refers to Graham's distress over Khrushchev's bellicose posturing at a summit in Paris: "Dr. Graham compared the summit crisis with 'the last days' referred to in the Bible. 'We may be living at the end of history.... God may be allowing us to witness the end of an

---

<sup>23</sup> "A Vivid Portrait," p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>25</sup> "Salesmen Fete Graham," *The New York Times*, March 1, 1958, p. 13.

age.”<sup>26</sup> However, like its treatment of biblical apocalypticism, the media did not delineate or comment on Graham’s eschatology beyond merely citing these examples.

Central to the concerns of fundamentalist evangelicals was the perceived decline in American morality and spiritual life. In the postwar years, the threat of communism, evidence of moral decay and economic uncertainty were consistently cited as examples of declining American morality and piety. In addition, Robert Wuthnow contends, “Materialism in the West was criticized as a sign of religious malaise. So were the growing indications of moral decay. Even peace and prosperity were conditions that might tempt the righteous astray.”<sup>27</sup> In the 1920s, fundamentalists had fought (and lost) against the teaching of the dangerous theory of evolution in public schools. Now, “they saw the entire culture dominated by non-Christian influences” and “became convinced that all of society had come under the sway of ideas that excluded God, ideas they saw as forming a pattern and an ideology that they eventually termed ‘secular humanism.’”<sup>28</sup> In addition to concern over a secular and godless educational system, conservative Christians had been troubled over the perceived rise in sexuality immorality since the 1930s. Other warnings of moral collapse pointed toward popular music as a contaminating culprit, especially jazz and rock and roll.

Warnings of declining morality and spirituality had been a constant motif in conservative American evangelicalism throughout its history. Prophecy writers used societal examples to illustrate the need for revival; at stake was not only the soul of the nation, but its very existence. These ideas were shaped into their eschatological discourse; some of the themes had existed in varying forms throughout the course of their

---

<sup>26</sup> “Graham Deplores Crisis at Summit,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 1960, p. 18.

<sup>27</sup> Wuthnow, p. 43

<sup>28</sup> Nancy T. Ammerman, in Kintz & Lesage, p. 80.

experience in American public life. Others were unique to the atomic age, often framed in a Cold War context, or in relation to dispensationalist views on communism. Their interaction with government was often counterintuitive. While premillennial dispensationalists often bemoaned the secularization of governmental institutions, they also believed that the authority of a divine government should not be challenged: “The Christian is called to a higher concept of government. He submits to the powers that be: because government is of God.”<sup>29</sup> The Christian duty is to “be the finest citizen in the land ... wherein respect for law and government becomes a sacred duty.”<sup>30</sup> However, government was not what it once was to the average fundamentalist Christian. A writer in *Moody Monthly* claims, “We are losing America in government – an area where Christian motivation, if not Christian purpose, was once a tower of strength and a source of vision.”<sup>31</sup> To a certain extent they felt ostracized from their role – what they believed was their “sacred duty” – in influencing governmental policies and practices.<sup>32</sup> Declining spirituality and Christian influence, a persistent lament in dispensationalist circles, necessitated the difficult job of saving souls and winning new converts to the true faith. There was a consistent sense of not having enough time, as the shadow of an imminent millennium loomed larger in what they perceived as tumultuous times.

Writers in premillennial journals were disturbed by a perceived tide of secularism that compromised American spirituality. In particular, that the education system was becoming godless. Furthermore, two United States Supreme Court decisions in 1962 and 1963 that outlawed school prayer had further reinforced fundamentalists’ belief that they

---

<sup>29</sup> “The Christian and The Powers That Be,” *Moody Monthly*, July 1961, p. 15. *Moody Monthly* was an evangelical magazine, published by Chicago’s Moody Bible Institute that spread the prophetic word.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> “We Are Losing America,” *Moody Monthly*, July 1961, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> Wuthnow, p. 173.

were losing their influence “on an institution which fundamentalist religious forces had once regarded as the domain in which they were the strongest, the public school.”<sup>33</sup> American universities and colleges were lost to liberal modernism, despite the fact that “most ... were founded to strengthen the faith they now regard so lightly.”<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, if schoolchildren “learn to mold their ideas of right and wrong without reference to God, the foundation of our liberty is undermined.”<sup>35</sup> Secularism, which was perceived as amoral – if not immoral – threatened American liberty which, the fundamentalists believed, was inextricably tied to spirituality: “The reason Americans are so insensitive to the devastating secular tide that threatens to wash away every remaining liberty is because we have lost the spiritual vision of freedom.”<sup>36</sup> The gravity of these problems intensified in a period subjected to “the relentless march of materialistic Communism,” and when “atomic weapons are in the hands of irresponsible nationalists.”<sup>37</sup> The only remedy was revival. Revival was essential, and to premillennial dispensationalists – a group that was generally opposed to social reforms and any kind of amelioration – evangelism was the most appropriate course of action. It was not their duty to fix a wrecked world, but it was their duty to save as many souls as possible before the coming of their Lord.<sup>38</sup> In fact, a common reminder used by prophecy writers maintained, “The prospect of the Lord’s return is no escape mechanism. Rather it should motivate us

---

<sup>33</sup> Martin E. Marty & Scott Appleby, *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Oliver W. Price, “Can America Be Neutral Toward God?” *The Sunday School Times*, July 4, 1959, p. 509.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 510.

<sup>37</sup> “Revival or Ruin.” *The Sunday School Times*, May 7, 1960, p. 356.

<sup>38</sup> One of the prominent dispensational evangelists of the nineteenth century, Dwight L. Moody was famous for saying, “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’” Indeed, this attitude was persistent in conservative American fundamentalism. Dwight L. Moody in Marsden, pp. 21-22.

increasingly to be light in the world, the salt of the earth, to be righteous as He is righteous.”<sup>39</sup>

To elucidate the dangers of secularism and spiritual decline prophecy writers had only to engage with anti-communist discourse. Cold War rhetoric was readily available and easily translated to suit their purposes. The Soviet Union was an example of a “secular state in full bloom.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, a nation without spirituality could deteriorate to the level of godless communism, one that “kills those who are hopelessly diseased with capitalist ideas, with the same calm assurance of a farmer who shoots a few sick cows to save the rest of the herd.”<sup>41</sup> Prophecy writers also addressed Soviet Communism’s millennial ideas,<sup>42</sup> and asked, “Can man without God purge human sin and bring in the millennium?”<sup>43</sup> The answer was always no. Rather, the millennialism of the Soviets was a “false millennium.”<sup>44</sup> Prophecy writers were quick to discredit a non-spiritual materialistic millennium, positing that “the Great Imitator presents a false millennium that’s only a counterfeit. Many preliminary signs are offered ... the New Day promised by Communism.”<sup>45</sup>

Biblical prophecy resonated with an impressive prescience when applied directly to contemporary events. In particular, the creation of Israel in 1948 had a profound

---

<sup>39</sup> “Revival or Ruin.” p. 356.

<sup>40</sup> “Can America Be Neutral,” p. 510.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 510.

<sup>42</sup> Norman Cohn was one of the first millennial scholars to identify the millenarian character of the Marxist program of the Soviet Union: “During the half-century since 1917 there has been a constant repetition...with the most disoriented and desperate of the poor, in phantasies of a final, exterminatory struggle against ‘the great one’s’; and of a perfect world from which self-seeking would be forever banished.” Cohn, p. 286. In addition, Daniel Wojcik argues, “the Marxist promise of world revolution and redemption of the working class is an explicit form of secularized millenarianism.” Wojcik, p. 97. American premillennials, though, were quick to recognize and discard this brand of ‘godless millennialism.’

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 510.

<sup>44</sup> Vance Havner, “Counterfeit Millennium,” *Moody Monthly*, March 1963, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

impact on premillennial dispensationalists and other millennial Christians out of the premillennial fold. Paul Boyer notes that “When the Jewish National Council proclaimed Israel a nation ... prophecy believers responded with intense emotion, tempered by the gratified awareness that they had known all along that this event would take place.”<sup>46</sup> In the American premillennial tradition the Jews occupied an important place in their prophetic framework. Jesus would not return until the Jews had established a nation in Palestine.<sup>47</sup>

Throughout its first decade in existence, Israel featured prominently in the prophetic journals of the late fifties and early sixties. When combined with the potential horrors of thermonuclear war, the existence of Israel in the holy land packed a one two punch. In a *Moody Monthly* editorial entitled, “Is it Later Than We Think?” the writers warned of the inherent danger of these cumulative signs. After contemplating the acute vulnerability of the United States to nuclear attack, the author contemplated that “Among the striking evidences of the movement toward end times is the emergence of a Jewish nation in 1948.”<sup>48</sup> References to Israel and the imminent end of the world occurred frequently in dispensationalist journals in this period when topics from Sputnik to the Limited Test Ban were under discussion. Israel featured more prominently in articles that were concerned with contemporary prophetic trends or evidence of an approaching millennium. A crucial step had already been taken in the fulfillment of God’s prophetic timetable. Prophetic writers utilized Israel in their apocalyptic discourse both as evidence and to add legitimacy to their temporal speculations.

---

<sup>46</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 187.

<sup>47</sup> There was a strong sense among postwar millennialists that the creation of the state of Israel had once again started “God’s prophetic clock.” It was a confirmation of prophetic belief, and was used as proof that the Second Coming was indeed imminent. Thompson, p. 146.

<sup>48</sup> “Is it Later Than We Think?” *Moody Monthly*, November 1961, p. 9.



Prophetic writing in the late fifties and early sixties also incorporated Russia into premillennial apocalyptic discourse. Interpreters of biblical prophecy looked to the book of Ezekiel to verify their claims that contemporary Russia was clearly represented in biblical texts: “Some 2,500 years ago the prophet Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jeremiah all foresaw in the far-distant future an invasion of Israel from out of the north. Ezekiel identified this invasion with Rosh, or what today is Russia (Ezek. 38:2).”<sup>49</sup> In considering prophetic evidence (Israel, declining spirituality, nuclear weapons etc.<sup>50</sup>) dispensationalist writers assured their readers that end times were certainly near. Extending this logic to Russia, the argument followed, “If the end of the age is near, as many believe, then Russia’s invasion of Palestine is near also.”<sup>51</sup> Russia, the great godless communist nation, was accorded a significant role as catalyst to the impending rapture.

The Soviet Union, armed to the teeth with thermonuclear weapons, could certainly accomplish cataclysm on a biblical scale. Therefore, premillennials contended that Russia represented the “armies from the north,” which would invade an unsuspecting Israel. “Do not be surprised,” they argued, “that Russia has her national satellites and her mighty armaments and that by political intrigue and commercial pressure she is paving the way for attempted conquest and control of the Middle East.”<sup>52</sup> The confidence of their application of biblical texts to contemporary events, in this case Russia, demonstrates a

---

<sup>49</sup> “The Future of Russia,” *Moody Monthly*, October 1963, p. 31.

<sup>50</sup> Other examples, which fall outside the scope of this thesis, analyze other portents. For example, “Disaster Warning,” *Moody Monthly*, December 1963, p. 14, identifies the severe natural calamities of 1963, including earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and volcanic eruptions. These ‘natural’ warnings were traditional prophetic fare, and were more common before the Second World War. Israel’s nationhood and the prospect of nuclear war meant that natural ‘signs of the times’ generally took a backseat. Another prophetic sign which is not analyzed in this thesis, is the belief that forms of world government, such as the UN and NATO, “point toward the beast.” Vance Havner, “Counterfeit Millennium,” *Moody Monthly*, March 1963, p. 79.

<sup>51</sup> “The Future of Russia,” p. 31.

<sup>52</sup> “Editorial,” *Moody Monthly*, September 1962, p. 70.

deep faith in their discursive approach to the apocalypse. Without grounding in biblical prophetic discourse, very few Americans outside of the premillennial frame would accept these connections.<sup>53</sup> However, premillennial dispensationalists' hope for a redemptive apocalypse led them to look eagerly for contemporary signs to assure them that Christ's millennial kingdom was near.

Confronting modern developments in science and technology in the nuclear age represented an opportunity for premillennial dispensationalists to fit these developments into their prophetic framework. It is far too simplistic to assert that there was a naturally entrenched antagonism between modern science and the conservative evangelical discourse. Christian evangelicals adopted Baconian principles and inductive reasoning as a guide to understanding God's creation in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>54</sup> However, although scientific principles and discoveries might not have been incommensurate with dispensationalist doctrine, there was a muted satisfaction in the culpability of modern science for the horrors of the atomic age. The premillennial dispensationalists inherited the same new technologies and conveniences discovered by science as all other Americans. They had access to nifty new gadgets, and dishwashers and state-of-the-art kitchens lightened burdensome chores. But, despite the positive achievements of science, there was a sense of betrayal. A retired general wrote in *The Sunday School Times*, "In the past few decades scientists have made almost unbelievable strides in searching out the

---

<sup>53</sup> A notable exception came after the period this thesis analyzes. Ronald Reagan had an interest in eschatology and he told an Israeli lobbyist in 1983, "I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if we're the generation that's going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of those prophecies lately, but believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through." Reagan in Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 142.

<sup>54</sup> For a comprehensive study of nineteenth century evangelicalism, and an extensive examination of the use of Baconianism as a theological method, refer to Mark Noll's *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

truths of nature, and more is to be expected.”<sup>55</sup> He went on to describe the benefits of science’s unveiling of nature for the Christian, but was still concerned: “Nevertheless, one has only to read current books, magazine articles, and newspapers to realize that such is not the case with most scientists, philosophers, and intellectuals. As never before they seem to reject God altogether, or try to push Him so far into the background that He is of no significance today.”<sup>56</sup> Although he framed his lament in prophetic terms – one of many reasons why he believed the lord’s return was imminent – the belief that science had abandoned God was common in dispensationalist circles.

If science had abandoned religion, it did not shatter confidence in evangelical faith. When not regarded as a portent for end times, conservative evangelicals saw an opportunity to wrest the souls of men from the claws of scientific agnosticism. For Wilbur M. Smith, the venerable member of the Moody Bible Institute, science had thrown down the gauntlet in a book he reviewed titled *Science Ponders Religion*. Smith cited a passage from the book that reasoned: “The historical bases of divine revelation are devoid of evidential quality essential for conclusions.”<sup>57</sup> To him this “terrible statement” offered a vital challenge for members of the faith interested in evangelism to win souls “before the age shall come to an end.”<sup>58</sup> In the eyes of conservative evangelicals, modern thought denigrated the souls of men and unbelieving scientists contributed to the corruption of the American nation. This was often framed in a Cold War context, as Smith opined, “and this statement is not from a book titled *Science Rejects Religion* but

---

<sup>55</sup> Lieut. General William K. Harrison, Jr. (ret.) “Why I believe the Lord’s Return Is Near,” *The Sunday School Times*, January 9, 1960, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>57</sup> Wilbur M. Smith, “Our Agnostic World and Its One Hope,” *Moody Monthly*, April 1963, p. 37.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 38.

*Science Ponders Religion*; a book published in America, not Russia.”<sup>59</sup> It is implicit in this statement that not only would modern “unbelieving” science be better suited for a godless communist nation such as Russia, but also that to ponder religion *is* to reject it.

The fundamentalist branch of evangelical Protestantism with which the majority of dispensationalists claimed affinity was oriented towards opposing liberalism and modernism in Christian theology.<sup>60</sup> Theirs was a mission of organizing conservative doctrine based on biblical inerrancy to counter what they regarded as a rising tide of secularism in American culture. To this end, it is no stretch to characterize the discursive tendencies of fundamentalism as opposed to not only modernism in theology, but also modernism in general. This is evident when looking at premillennials’ take on modern science. The wider American public regarded Atomic scientists as saviours for their part in ending the Second World War; they were revered as heroes in the American press and many had become household names.<sup>61</sup> There was also a more subtle perception of scientists as gatekeepers of cosmic secrets. Their ability to harness the energy of the atom was perceived as a superhuman achievement, the inner workings of which was shrouded in mystery to the layperson. This recondite knowledge gave scientists the aura of secular prophets who could rationalize the cosmos without spiritual guidance. It was the role of scientist as prophet and inheritor of nature’s secrets that made dispensationalists (and others in American society) uncomfortable.

After the euphoria of mastering the bomb and ending the war had dissipated, the Cold War reality of a nuclear balance of terror set in and the achievements of science

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>60</sup> Marsden, p. 57.

<sup>61</sup> Jessica Wang, “Scientists and the Problem of the Public in Cold War America, 1945-1960,” *Osiris*, vol. 17 (2002), p. 325.

were no longer immune to criticism. Conservative evangelicals attacked science for its secularism, modernism, and the challenge to their own exclusive prophetic license. In an article truculently titled “Will Science Destroy the World?” Ralph T. Overman, a writer for Billy Graham’s *Christianity Today*, considered the development of a powerful nuclear weapon that through “an error in the scientist’s calculations could lead to a global holocaust and man’s extinction.”<sup>62</sup> While Overman recognized the role of science in providing good for mankind, in particular its beneficial gains for “food, health, and power,” he still recognized science as a “force” which had been thrust upon the world in “most dramatic and devastating circumstances.”<sup>63</sup> This reduction of science to a unified “force” was common in fundamental evangelical writing, as it was in the mainstream media. There was little distinction or division when describing the accomplishments or failures of science. Rather, it was characterized as a benign or malevolent force that acted on human progress like the climate; uncontrollable phenomena that could harm or benefit like a spin of Fortuna’s wheel. However, one thing that is evident from analysis of evangelical publications in the late fifties and early sixties was that science was pictured as something more likely to bring harm than good.

It was common for premillennial dispensationalists to work contemporary events into their apocalyptic design. Particularly striking was the importance they accorded Sputnik and the early space age in their prophetic framework. To dispensationalists, man’s trespass into space violated God’s law and was understood as another of modern humanity’s encroachments in the litany of encroachments that could very well hasten the apocalypse. This was a natural extension of their analysis of nuclear weapons and other

---

<sup>62</sup> “Will Science Destroy the World?” p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

technological issues, as once again they recognized science specifically, and humanity generally, as those responsible for the fear and uncertainty of the space age. Dispensationalists often combined nuclear issues with their analyses of the space race, for example, “In the piling up of nuclear weapons and man’s invasion of outer space exists potentially a situation which compares in frightfulness to the one pictured in the Bible.”<sup>64</sup> Their rationale, supported by scripture, was as follows:

May we suggest that in these prophetic words we have a reference to man’s attempts to break through the barriers of space set by the almighty, and which bind man to this earth. The Bible says: “The heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s: but the earth hath he given to the children of men” (Psalm 115:16).<sup>65</sup>

Other examples included the biblical story of the tower of Babel whose top would reach heaven in a program to “break God’s bands asunder,” a rebellious act frustrated by God.<sup>66</sup>

A *Moody Monthly* editorial quoted Roy William Johnson, Director of the U.S. Defense Department’s Advanced Research Projects Agency, as claiming that space research “should in no way be construed as prying into God’s secrets.”<sup>67</sup> However, that defense was rejected as heretical: “if we are foolish enough to place manned satellites and space platforms above the well-being of our own immortal souls,” argued *Moody Monthly*’s editors, “we too shall surely hear the thunder of God’s voice.”<sup>68</sup> The nuclear age brought about the military industrial complex that in turn inaugurated the space race. To the dispensationalists these trends were clearly against God’s plan for humanity, or, as

---

<sup>64</sup> Arthur W. Kac, “Prophetic Patterns In the World Today,” *Moody Monthly*, May 1960, p. 27.

<sup>65</sup> DeHaan, p. 108.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 108.

<sup>67</sup> “The Race in Space,” *Moody Monthly*, May 1959, p. 13.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

one commentator put it, man “brazenly seeks to invade the heavens, in spite of God’s ‘no trespass’ signs.”<sup>69</sup> At this incipient stage of manned space travel, just under a decade before Neil Armstrong’s moonwalk, premillennial dispensationalists viewed this new achievement of science much as they viewed science itself – with suspicion; suspicion that was readily translated into their eschatology. Summing up the argument a dispensationalist author affirms, “This is how the present age – the Space Age – will end: in judgment.”<sup>70</sup>

The advent of the atomic age reinvigorated premillennialism by delivering prophecy writers new apocalyptic scenarios to explore. Before Hiroshima, God’s means of invoking the end of humanity was visualized as a manifestation of nature’s wrath; earthquakes, floods, volcanoes and other phenomena would expedite the Second Advent. Now, in the minds of premillennial dispensationalists, God had handed humanity the means of its self-destruction in the form of nuclear weapons. Unlike secular apocalypticism, whose eschatology was placed firmly in the arena of human agency, biblical apocalypticism’s cardinal rule was that no end to humanity could come without divine agency, and only the saved would ascend from the wreckage of God’s apocalypse. This raised thorny issues for evangelical prophecy writers who had to rectify a number of temporal problems: Could nuclear weapons end humanity before the second coming? How would nuclear weapons factor into God’s program of last things? There were various interpretations of the role of nuclear war among prophecy writers. However, by the late fifties and early sixties the dominant consensus among premillennials was that

---

<sup>69</sup> Paul R. Alderman, Jr., “Space Flight?” *Moody Monthly*, May 1959, p. 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

end-times could come only by God's prerogative, and the development of the bomb was an irrefutable sign of the imminence of the Second Coming.

Faith in divine eschatology alleviated the fears of religious apocalypticists, as far as concerns about their own mortality and the unholy state of the world. Their apocalypse was a redemptive one, which assured them their exclusive membership in a restored millennial order.<sup>71</sup> Understanding these beliefs is essential when considering how prophecy writers situated the bomb in their apocalyptic discourse. While the horrific realities of nuclear warfare were well known to American premillennialists, as it was to the wider American public, they could take solace in determining through the prophetic scriptures that nuclear weapons were part of God's plan. Nuclear technology was less discovered by man as it was bestowed by God: "A sword has been put into his hand by God himself for the maintenance of order and the punishment of evildoers. The sword is necessary because the world is evil."<sup>72</sup> The development of nuclear weapons was also a sign that the Lord's return was near. The bomb, prophecy writers argued, was a manifestation of Daniel's prophetic words that "knowledge shall be increased." Modern science's mastery of the atom and the development of the bomb was,

a child of man's fantastic increase of scientific knowledge. It is a staggering paradox, that man's progress (?) in the field of education and knowledge should result in the discovery of such an instrument of destruction with the potentialities of wiping out the entire civilization of this world. But all this too was foretold by the Bible.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Wojcik, p. 145.

<sup>72</sup> Henry Stob, "An Ethic's Professor's View," *Christianity Today*, June 21, 1963, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> DeHaan, p. 101.



The suspicion of progress – or at least the questioning of it – invoked by the question mark in this passage is typical of prophecy writers. Also typical is the linking of contemporary developments to biblical prophecy. Most notable, though, is the unwavering belief that nuclear weapons were a sign of the lord's coming; rather than being something to dread the dispensationalists interpreted this development optimistically as a sign that the restored millennial kingdom would be soon at hand. This perspective assured the saved that the bomb was nothing to fear; rather it was an element of God's divine plan. As DeHaan assured, "To the believer, however, all the present day developments are no cause for fear, for he knows that it is all according to plan." He further eased tensions by confirming that it was "Jesus Himself who said: 'And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.'" (Luke 21:28).<sup>74</sup>

The realities of the nuclear age may not have been reason for believers to fear. However, it was clear that the possibility of a nuclear Armageddon – implemented on *His* authority, of course – and the imminent return of Christ had dire consequences for unbelievers. An editorial in *Moody Monthly* pointed out that the Christian "needs to be aware of the danger of ignoring clear evidence ... [that] we are rushing toward the climactic events of end times at a breathtaking rate."<sup>75</sup> Citing Matthew 24:36, "Of the day and hour knoweth no man ... but my father only," evangelical prophecy writers agreed that it was a fallacy to presume the actual date of the Lord's coming. But it was well within the limits of their apocalyptic discourse to presume that the end would happen very soon. Therefore, the most logical thing to fear, the editorial warned, was the "real

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>75</sup> "As We Near End Times," *Moody Monthly*, June 1961, p. 10.

peril of these days [that] lies not in crisis and tumultuousness, but in the state of spiritual lethargy which the Word of God calls sleeping.... [M]any ... professing Christians are sleeping already.”<sup>76</sup> The existence of nuclear weapons, then, was a call to revival, not a reason to hide one’s head in the sand. In the godless nuclear age, premillennial dispensationalists sought to save souls in the face of an impending apocalypse, albeit a redemptive one. In an article entitled “The Countdown,” using language steeped in nuclear age imagery, an editorial explained that “There will come a time when all that is necessary to this wonderful Second Advent will be set in motion, and there will be a kind of divine ‘countdown’ until the heavens open in a blaze of glory.”<sup>77</sup> It concluded by invoking a nuclear missile launch countdown and asked, “Are you ready for the countdown?”<sup>78</sup>

The majority of prophecy writers agreed that nuclear weapons were merely an element of God’s plan for humanity on earth; there was nothing to fear as any nuclear catastrophe annihilating entire populations would be an element of His apocalyptic design. However, not all premillennials were so readily convinced. As historian Jeff Smith posits: “Nuclear weapons, after all, sharply challenge the traditional Judeo-Christian belief in an omnipotent God. They seem to give humanity the power to short-circuit the Last Judgment, and, thus they call that omnipotence into question.”<sup>79</sup> It was a frightening possibility for a premillennialist to consider: the millennium for which they had been waiting so long, which contemporary events seemed to promise posthaste, forever delayed by humanity’s own nuclear actions before they could join their Messiah

---

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>77</sup> “The Countdown,” *The Sunday School Times*, October 8, 1960, p. 771.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 771.

<sup>79</sup> Jeff Smith, *Unthinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 38.

in the clouds. Despite their unwavering faith in God's mastery over human affairs, the bomb, with all its devastating potential caused some to voice concern and warn "No Christian may take part in the mad and wicked act of racial suicide and undertake to put an end to human history."<sup>80</sup>

Essentially, fundamentalists were exposed to two conceptual inevitabilities. First, there was the constant bombardment by the mainstream media of the potential for World War III – analyzed in detail in subsequent chapters – which became more probable with the constant evolution of thermonuclear weapons and the deteriorating world scene. Then there was the Second Coming. While many religious apocalypticists argued that World War III would be the catalyst that ushered in the end of time, others were not so sure. If the former preceded the latter, what would that mean for God's apocalyptic timetable? An article in *The Sunday School Times* looked at these two Cold War possibilities:

Two stupendous events seem to lie just over the horizon. These are war and the Second Coming of Christ, and no one knows which will occur first. Of the one the world is well aware, but not of the other; instructed Christians know of both, and hope that Christ will come before a World War.<sup>81</sup>

While other methods of logic and reasoning could not reconcile future eventualities, Christian apocalyptic discourse had a distinct advantage. In the face of uncertainty there was always faith. The inductive logic favoured by prophecy writers when addressing prophetic scripture was based on a faith in the inerrancy of the Bible and an unshakable belief that their present dispensation would end as the Bible prophesied. Therefore, concerns over humanity beating Christ to the punch by ending the present age before Him

---

<sup>80</sup> "An Ethic's Professor's View," p. 7.

<sup>81</sup> "The Countdown," p. 771.

were essentially rendered moot. Although nuclear annihilation could not happen unless it was part of God's plans, prophecy writers entertained the idea – if only to alleviate the tensions of their readers. As DeHaan assured readers, "The unmistakable accuracy of the prophecies of the days in which we live stamps the Bible with the seal of its dependability."<sup>82</sup>

One of the continuities of premillennial dispensationalism was the belief that the world was beyond redemption. The only hope for an immoral and corrupt American society was through the direct divine action of God's prophetic plan outlined in the Bible. Much like "their Gilded Age predecessors who had dismissed reforms aimed at ameliorating the social toll of industrialization,"<sup>83</sup> premillennialists in the nuclear age had reinvigorated this argument through their analysis of nuclear issues. Their stark and defeatist – defeatist to the extent of its belief in the futility of any non-divine efforts to ameliorate society – opposition of liberal modernism in theology was centred on this tenet. Prophecy writers capitalized on the widespread fatalism of American Christians who, despite their best efforts, found few reasons to be hopeful in the face of the tense international situation and the existence of thermonuclear weapons. This won them converts and strengthened their resolve. A characteristic example of this argument, in an article entitled "Loving His Appearing," went as follows:

we should love His appearing *for the world's sake*. These are days of uncertainty and fear. Men are creating terrible weapons of destruction, which can be used to wipe out whole populations. Men are afraid and, as never before, long for peace. But we know that peace can never come until Jesus Christ comes again. Only when He sits upon the throne

---

<sup>82</sup> DeHaan, p. 107.

<sup>83</sup> Boyer, *When Time*, p. 126.

of His glory will men beat their “swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”<sup>84</sup>

The dualism in the conviction that there was no hope for this world until Jesus had restored his millennial kingdom was testament to the comfort that membership in the exclusive ranks of the saved afforded. Confidence that there “is no hope for this floundering, blundering old world in this atomic age” was tempered by the assurance that “God has a program, and a plan which is running exactly on time.”<sup>85</sup>

Prophecy writers scoffed at those who advocated peace, and believed the possibility of restoring order and dignity to the world was anathema. This led some writers to justify nuclear war itself. Weighing heavily on their considerations was the social costs and ethical implications of nuclear war, the irreversible wrecked state of the world, and the firm belief that God would not have afforded humanity nuclear technology without his agency. A retired “Christian” General concluded in *Christianity Today* that “The massive destruction caused by nuclear weapons is not an ethical bar against their use in a war justifiable by other moral considerations.”<sup>86</sup> Although he leaves whatever “moral considerations” he intended ambiguous, the concluding lines of the article belie his real considerations:

The utter horror of nuclear war and the demonstrated inability of men to stop human crime (including military aggression) should convince all Christians that there is no hope of enduring peace until Christ shall establish his kingdom in the Second Advent.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> T. Roland Philips, “Loving His Appearing,” *Moody Monthly*, October 1958, p. 24.

<sup>85</sup> DeHaan, p. 15.

<sup>86</sup> William K. Harrison, “A Christian’s General View: Is Nuclear War Justifiable?” *Christianity Today*, June 21, 1963, p. 3.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

In analyzing prophecy writing from Sputnik to the Limited Test Ban, nuclear issues loomed large. The existence of the bomb served as the starting point for the shaping of the discourse.

The bomb served as additional proof that humanity was lost and its destructive potential bestowed new meaning to prophetic scripture. For example, one prophecy writer pointed out (he was not the first or last to use this example) that a nuclear holocaust conformed to “what was described in terms of II Peter 10:13 in which the universe is envisioned as ‘melting with a fervent heat.’”<sup>88</sup> However, as much as premillennials incorporated the bomb into their discourse, it was consistently regarded as a sign that the end times were nearing, or as a possible method for the destruction that would come in the Tribulation. The bomb had its place in their discourse, but unlike secular apocalypticism that viewed the bomb as the final act; to premillennial dispensationalists it could only be a sign or a tool. God would determine the final act. If there was a nuclear war before the Second Coming, it was the Christian’s duty to survive that war. Survival meant that there would be time for revival, time to win more souls, and time to await the millennium. Their support for civil defense demonstrates this. An editorial in *Moody Monthly* asked, “Will Your Church Be Ready?”<sup>89</sup> It assured its readers that “a thermonuclear attack would not necessarily destroy a major part of the nation, but it would disrupt normal life completely.”<sup>90</sup> Later in the same issue, there was an interview with the Director of the Civil and Defense Mobilization, Leo Hoegh. Hoegh described the actions that churches and congregations could take to protect themselves in the event of a national emergency. The article concluded that “Clergymen are natural leaders among

---

<sup>88</sup> Ralph T. Overman, “Will Science Destroy the World?” *Christianity Today*, May 25, 1959, p. 3.

<sup>89</sup> “Will Your Church Be Ready?” *Moody Monthly*, February 1959, p. 13.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

their own people and in the community. Congregations also have lay leadership and skills and experiences that will be needed in time of disaster.”<sup>91</sup> The support of government civil defense policies did not run contrary to the premillennial belief that the world was beyond saving. Rather, it demonstrated that Christians could survive nuclear aggression, and it showed a faith that no catastrophic nuclear Armageddon would come before *the* Armageddon.

Concurrently, fundamentalists scoffed at peace movements organized in opposition to the government’s nuclear policies. For example, a writer in *Christianity Today*, in a diatribe against the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), asked, “Isn’t there something twisted when men of eminent position sponsor a crusade which will give brutal communism unquestionable control of the planet?”<sup>92</sup> Clearly, conservative evangelicals regarded any peace movement that fought for disarmament as a pathetic and futile, perhaps dangerous, endeavour. It was much more in keeping with the discursive structure of biblical apocalypticism to support the government’s civil defense and nuclear policies and oppose voices that argued for any kind of amelioration.

Premillennial dispensationalists approached the nuclear era as they had faced other periods: with a keen eye on contemporary events that showed them their Lord’s return was imminent. Although they raised familiar alarms – mainly declining spirituality and the general immorality of American society – they looked with comfort at the development of nuclear weapons, as it was a sign that their dispensation was ending; soon they could enjoy the millennium on earth with their saviour. The American dispensationalists’ biblical apocalyptic discourse serves as a counterpoint to the secular

---

<sup>91</sup> “Is Your Church Ready if Bombs Should Fall?” *Moody Monthly*, February 1959, p. 17.

<sup>92</sup> H.H. Lippincott, “Nuclear Threat and Soviet Russia,” *Christianity Today*, October 27, 1958, p. 14.

apocalyptic discourse that developed concurrently, sharing some of the same prophetic religious language, but without any explicit connection to Christianity or spirituality.



## **Chapter 2: The Fallout Shelter Debate: Rising From the Ashes of Nuclear War, or, Obliterated by the Holocaust**

While apocalyptic language was not at all foreign to American premillennials, it was not as common in the secular mainstream media. However, in the fallout shelter debate the mainstream media utilized apocalyptic rhetoric and motifs in a period when the shadow of nuclear war loomed large. America's brief encounter with fallout shelters began with haphazard initiatives and suggestions by the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization (OCDM) in the 1950s, reached its pinnacle in 1961 following Kennedy's Berlin speech,<sup>1</sup> and fizzled following the Cuban missile crisis. By the limited test ban treaty in 1963 fallout shelters, or at least the great debate concerning fallout shelters, had receded into the realm of memory. Decades later, the memory of fallout shelters had turned to nostalgia. Reports indicated that 1 million of 50 million households had undertaken construction of fallout shelters, according to a 1961 civil defense survey.<sup>2</sup> Later reports, which are more reliable, suggested that approximately 200,000 families had built shelters.<sup>3</sup> But it is not the building of fallout shelters that bears fruit for analysis. Rather, the debate that surrounded the fallout shelter issue offers insight into how a

---

<sup>1</sup> Soviet leaders had provoked a new crisis in Berlin by demanding that the Western allies give up their foothold in Berlin, which they threatened to hand over to the Communist East German government. Kennedy made it obvious to the American people that the situation was dire, and announced in a speech on July 25, 1961 that "To recognize the possibilities of nuclear war in the missile age without our citizens' knowing what they should do and where they should go would be a failure of responsibility," the U.S. government would "let every citizen know what steps he can take without delay to protect his family in case of attack." Kennedy in, "The Sheltered Life," *Time*, October 20, 1961, p. 22. The Berlin crisis of 1961 was neutralized by the Soviet erection of the Berlin wall in August of that year, but the shelter furor had already started with Kennedy's speech, and would not abate until a year later. Sherry, pp. 244-245.

<sup>2</sup> Alice L. George, *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Watson, "We Couldn't Run, So We Hoped We Could Hide," *Smithsonian*, (April 1994), p. 47.

secular apocalyptic discourse permeated American culture in a period of fear and uncertainty. The number of actual shelters built is a point rendered moot by the sweeping mainstream media coverage. Few Americans did not have an opinion on the fallout shelter debate. The ubiquity of fallout shelter stories, articles, television and radio reports, indicates that it would have been near impossible to avoid exposure to the issue.

Numerous and divergent positions, arguments, and narratives developed in the fallout shelter debate but the majority of opinions – whether those of journalists, politicians, or the public – were framed in apocalyptic terms. Implicit in the fallout shelter debate was an understanding that fallout shelters represented an untested defense measure for a potential nuclear war, the severity and scope of which was unknown, but which many believed could annihilate the nation. Not all manifestations of this debate were explicitly eschatological. In fact, a number of media examples did not directly reference nuclear war or consider the possibilities of a catastrophic nuclear engagement with Russia. Regardless of the position one took in the fallout shelter debate, the linchpin of the issue was the shared knowledge of a potentially cataclysmic nuclear Armageddon. Those who were opposed to fallout shelters often applied a fatalistic defeatism by insisting that shelters offered no protection in the event of nuclear war. Those who supported fallout shelters were hopeful that the nation could be restored, rebuilt, and redeemed; some Americans would be left to emerge from their shelters and begin the great American experiment anew, sweeping the ashes of nuclear war aside to begin again. Both positions of the debate were on different sides of the same apocalyptic coin. Like the distinction between premillennialism and postmillennialism, secular apocalypticism also had its different strains.

The central questions posed in the fallout shelter debate were whether America could survive nuclear war and how much support the shelters and other civil defense measures would provide if war were to come.<sup>4</sup> Numerous scenarios, prognostications, and assurances emerged from different sectors of society. First, it is necessary to examine sources characterized by skepticism, fatalism, ambivalence – essentially all the reactions that were not firmly situated in either a pro-fallout shelter or anti-fallout shelter stance.

In contrast to the public conversation about nuclear weapons, nuclear weapons testing or the contamination of the milk supply by strontium-90, the debate about fallout shelters forced Americans to consider the prospect of nuclear war and apocalypse. Testing was a more manageable concern, as nobody believed testing would result or lead to an apocalyptic scenario. In this respect, Americans were able to confront “a real and present danger without coming to grips with the true reality ... the possibility of total destruction.”<sup>5</sup> This is a defense mechanism called displacement, where one retreats from something too threatening, and focuses one’s energy in a more manageable direction.<sup>6</sup> However, the majority of Americans in the early sixties did not have the wherewithal to avoid the fallout shelter debate or its grim connotations because the debate permeated the mainstream media.

An example that illustrates this is the case of Norwalk, Connecticut. Norwalk confronted the fallout shelter issue directly in late 1961 and early 1962. Its debate centered on whether public shelters were the right option for the town, which was near

---

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth D. Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Divine, *Blowing on the Wind: the Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 323.

<sup>6</sup> Spencer R. Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 212.

the New York City 'target area.' The town had advocates on both sides of the issue, but their musings on shelters demonstrated the uncertainty and unease with which Americans approached the topic. An article in the *New York Times* chronicled the town's debate, and presented their deliberations in these terms: "The argument runs way up and down the scale of opinions and values, to views about Russians, thoughts about the White House and musings about the earthly role of mankind."<sup>7</sup> Religious imagery was common in articles that addressed fallout shelter issues. The Norwalk article situated the debate in an apocalyptic framework and later extended the religious motif by describing the town's children practicing a duck-and-cover drill:

Within one and a half minutes 580 boys and girls, bashful children in the first grade through saucy youngsters in the sixth, were huddled along the walls of the first floor and the basement. Each was in the approved attitude of expecting a blow, knees to the wall and hands clasped behind bowed head as if in some sort of strange form of prayer to unknown gods.<sup>8</sup>

One of Norwalk's leading proponents of a public fallout shelter plan – which envisioned twenty-five community shelters built under the playgrounds of the public schools and with a capacity to shelter 3,000 persons – was a devout Mormon who believed, reasonably enough, that "atom-bomb drills were useless without fallout shelters."<sup>9</sup> The uncertainty and fatalism that shaped Norwalk's debate served as a microcosm for other fallout shelter debates in American society. According to one author

---

<sup>7</sup> Richard P. Hunt, "One Town's 'Great Debate' Over Shelters," *The New York Times*, February 4, 1962, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

“Norwalk is pondering an awesome choice: whether to burrow or to hope.”<sup>10</sup> But it is also arguable that for the majority of Americans to “burrow” was to hope. There were two different categories of hope operating in the fallout shelter debate. One was hope that nuclear war would never happen. The other was hope that fallout shelters would provide protection *if or when* war happened.

Talk of shelters was widespread among the American public, and thoughts tended to range from personal concerns to an intense apprehension. A *Time* magazine article asserted, “At cocktail parties and P.T.A. meetings and family dinners, on buses and commuter trains and around office watercoolers, talk turns to shelters. Almost everyone—man, woman and child—has an opinion.”<sup>11</sup> In a lengthy cover article on October 20, 1961, four women were asked their opinions on the shelter debate in a Denver cafeteria. The prospect of a wrecked nation, ravaged by a nuclear war, caused one woman to answer, “I’d just as soon be killed as come out of a shelter and see the country desolated.”<sup>12</sup> This response was representative of the fatalism many Americans adopted when forced to consider nuclear war and shelters. Further, this brand of fatalism belongs to the secular apocalyptic discourse in which there is no divine plan at work. It relinquishes humanity’s control over its own fate to a quasi-divine force, in this case, nuclear weapons. No shelter can save the doomed nation and nuclear war is the inevitable apocalyptic force that operates outside the realm of human agency.

One of the other women interviewed shaped her anxieties in more specific and personal terms. Her concern was, “It’s the children who give me the most worry. With my husband in one place and me in another, and the children at school, we really have no

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> “The Sheltered Life,” *Time*, October 20, 1961, p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

control.”<sup>13</sup> Like the woman who would rather be dead than see the country ruined, this woman feels powerless, realizing that she can have no control over where she, her husband, or her children will be when the bombs fall. Clearly, shelters could not have alleviated her anxieties. When forced to consider the efficacy of shelters, Americans had to consider the exigencies of nuclear war. This created feelings of frustration and powerlessness which manifested themselves in fatalistic resignation. This resignation was shaped by the belief that not only was nuclear war beyond their personal control, but it was also beyond humanity’s control. Therefore, fatalism in the fallout shelter debate was a significant element of a broader discursive trend: the secular apocalyptic in American culture.

Civil defense studies and outsourced Strategic Air Command (SAC) reports, such as those conducted by the RAND Corporation, analyzed the possible effects of a nuclear war on the mainland United States. These studies predicted the effects of an attack on an unsheltered nation versus a sheltered nation. Their predictions suggested that “a great majority of the deaths suffered in an atomic attack would come from fallout radiation – and it is against fallout radiation that shelters can be most effective.” A typical estimate of fatalities in an assumed 150-target attack was 160 million. But, an “adequate national system of fallout shelters might well cut the death rate to 85 million.”<sup>14</sup> When the fatalities numbered 85 million with an “adequate” system of fallout shelters, the reduced estimate still seemed, for most Americans, an unthinkable toll. Further, there was no way of knowing, even if one had a shelter, whether the attack would be downwind or overhead. This raises an important issue that many articles covering the fallout shelter

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 24.

debate failed to raise – one hardly ever raised by OCDM sources. The fact was shelters provided no protection from the immediate blast effects of a nuclear bomb. An editorial in *The Nation* called “‘Shelter’ is a Nice Word” put it this way:

“Shelter” is a nice word, but it represents merely the first and perhaps the simplest phase of a highly complex problem. The shelters that are currently talked about would provide at best a degree of protection not against the blast effects of hydrogen explosions, but against the massive radiation which would blanket much of the country in the wake of such explosions.<sup>15</sup>

To the editors of *The Nation*, these were the “practical considerations” of which many Americans might not be aware. In this respect, building a fallout shelter was a gamble like hoping the bomb would not fall on your city or town. If there was confusion in the American public on whether fallout shelters were an effective protection against direct nuclear blasts in the summer of 1961, that confusion was erased by early 1962 after numerous critical articles warned that fallout shelters only protected against fallout.

Even if one resided outside of an expected target area, many voices challenged the efficacy of fallout shelters. It was questioned whether fallout shelters could effectively protect their inhabitants from fallout. An article in *Time* quoted Marshal Rodion Y. Malinovsky, Soviet Minister of Defense as claiming, “Shelters against atomic and hydrogen bombs are nothing but coffins and tombs prepared in advance. There is no bunker, not even hermetically sealed, where one could sit quietly through explosions of atomic and hydrogen bombs.”<sup>16</sup> Supporters of Civil Defense were quick to dismiss this opinion as propaganda. However, others at home, such as Eugene Rabinowitch, the editor

---

<sup>15</sup> “‘Shelter’ is a Nice Word,” *The Nation*, September 12, 1959, p. 122.

<sup>16</sup> “Coffins or Shields?” *Time*, February 2, 1962, p. 15.

of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* expressed doubts about the utility of shelters, fearing that “any basement or backyard shelters the U.S. might come up with ‘would become obsolete even before they could be constructed across the country.’”<sup>17</sup> These positions were more observations and skepticism rather than direct opposition to the shelter program – the opponents of the shelter program took a more direct tack. Regardless, the effects were the same; calling into question the strength of shelters did not allay fears or banish the specter of nuclear war. Rather, it added to the mounting confusion and frustration over the fallout shelter debate. In turn, questioning the efficacy of fallout shelters contributed to thinking of an irredeemable apocalypse, by way of reinforcing notions of powerlessness.

Other writers looked less at the physical strength of shelters and more at who was, or was not, building them. Nationally syndicated columnist for the *New York Times*, James Reston, wrote a trenchant article, “How to Be Evaporated In Style,” that questioned the dedication of senior White House officials to the fallout shelter program. He noted the mixed messages coming from government and civil defense officials: “The newspapers are full these days of ads and admonitions about fall-out shelters. President Kennedy says that every well-regulated family should have one, though he hasn’t provided the same for his own family in his own houses.”<sup>18</sup> After describing how *The Washington Post* offered its readers the opportunity to be “evaporated in style” by providing them guidelines to building a “do-it-yourself shelter with a Colonial motif,” Reston concluded:

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> James Reston, “How to Be Evaporated in Style,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 1961, p. E8.



Personally, I am planning on spending so much time underground that any shelter I build is going to have a big picture window with a view of my kids walking on the Blue Ridge (if I can get them back from Berlin). But other people have other ideas and somebody in the government is going to have to satisfy their questions.<sup>19</sup>

Despite Reston's facetious tone, many Americans believed the fallout shelter debate was less about choosing between security and doom, and more about choosing how they would be "evaporated."

The American media covered almost every conceivable angle of the fallout shelter issue. One phenomenon that reflected both the mania over shelters and the quick rise and fall of the fallout shelter in public consciousness was the exploits of fallout shelter companies. Entrepreneurs, established companies, and many others exploited public fear and government initiatives in an attempt to profit from the sale of private fallout shelters. The initial successes, followed soon by failure, of these shelter builders is demonstrative of the brief time that shelters occupied space in American public life. For example, a September, 1961, *Time* magazine article on shelter builders quoted the president of the Los Angeles based Nuclear Survival Corporation, "I have to be blunt and ask, 'are you serious or just inquiring?' I haven't got time any more to tell people what fallout is anymore."<sup>20</sup> The confident businessman claimed that he had found himself with "more business than they could handle."<sup>21</sup> Yet by May of 1962, less than a year later, an article titled "Boom to Bust," also in *Time*, reported that over "600 shelter firms had failed." A swimming pool firm from Boston, which had switched to building fallout shelters a year before, was "back to swimming pools again."<sup>22</sup> The waning interest in

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. E8.

<sup>20</sup> "Shelter Skelter," *Time*, September 1, 1961, p. 59.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> "Boom to Bust," *Time*, May 18, 1962, p. 20.

fallout shelters did not reflect a broader belief in American society that the threat of nuclear cataclysm had subsided, but perhaps reinforces the common diagnosis of the early 1960s mainstream print media: the American public had become fatalistic in its thinking on fallout shelters. The president of the National Shelter Association, Frank F. Norton, in the fall of 1961 exclaimed, "My best salesmen are Kennedy and Khrushchev." By the spring of 1962 he had changed his tune: "If we had another international crisis, I don't know of a manufacturer who would make a move of his own until we got an explicit national plan endorsing home shelters."<sup>23</sup>

To some extent, chronicling the follies of shelter manufacturers was one of the only ways that reports about shelters could inject some levity in the grim debate. In a column of mock praise for shelter builders, James Reston wrote of absurd proposals for shelter constructions, noting that the "National Lumber Manufacturers Association has proposed a dandy little number out of wood, which everybody knows, doesn't burn."<sup>24</sup> Time magazine also included equally ridiculous examples:

A widely advertised "fallout suit," selling at the rate of 500 a week for \$21.95 each, actually provides no more protection against radiation than a raincoat. A promoter recently approached W. Dan Bell, head of Denver's Better Business Bureau, with a man-sized plastic bag which, he said, provided complete protection against fallout. All the owner had to do was crawl inside and pull the Zipper. But how, asked Bell, could the bag's occupant breathe? That, said the promoter, was something he had not yet worked out. Similarly, a Boston entrepreneur advertised a handy "shelter" for only \$4.50; it turned out to be a crowbar, for use in opening manhole covers.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> James Reston, "Those Sweet and Kindly Shelter Builders," *The New York Times*, November 12, 1961, p. E8.

<sup>25</sup> "The Sheltered Life," p. 25.

However, including absurd examples of hapless shelter entrepreneurs never excused writers from analyzing the issue at hand. If anything, the rush to buy “fallout suits” and shelters made of wood reflected the state of fearful desperation in which many Americans found themselves following Kennedy’s Berlin speech. It was easy to ridicule the man on the street selling crowbars as effective alternatives to shelters; it was not as easy to reconcile the motives of the people buying them. Even Reston’s column admonishing “those sweet and kindly shelter builders” ends on a somber and frustrated note: “A man can be thrown in jail in this country for shouting ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre, but the Government has been shouting for months about the biggest fire in the history of the world without coming up with a plan to deal with it.”<sup>26</sup> Americans’ reluctance to purchase shelters, according to a number of surveys conducted, was not because a lack of understanding on the issue, but a “prevailing attitude of fatalism.”<sup>27</sup>

Proponents of civil defense and the fallout shelter program did not access as wide an arsenal of rhetoric and imagery as their critics did. Rather, proponents presented their arguments as simple choices for the American public. A thermonuclear attack on an unprotected nation would result in millions of fatalities; however, a sheltered nation would suffer a less horrific tally. There was an inherent dualism in their position. While attempting to assuage fears, they reassured readers that a tenable civil defense program was possible. But in order to address public apathy toward the program, they warned that an unprotected nation would suffer catastrophic consequences. This position was framed

---

<sup>26</sup> “Those Sweet and Kindly,” p. E8.

<sup>27</sup> A *U.S. News* survey conducted in 1961 found that “everybody in this country, it seems, is thinking or talking about what to do in the case war starts and bombs fall on the U.S.” But, the survey found “no mass movement toward preparedness,” and “Americans are more pessimistic about the chances of survival.” *U.S. News* survey in Rose, p. 188.

as a choice “between trying to survive and abandoning all hope.”<sup>28</sup> Similar to the biblical apocalyptic, redemption was possible. Redemption in the biblical apocalyptic was contingent on accepting Jesus as your saviour. Redemption according to the secular apocalyptic was contingent on accepting civil defense as saviour. In addition, civil defense programs, while supported by the government, were intended for individual consumption. The OCDM provided the means – including guidelines and some subsidization – but the onus was on the individual to follow through. Like Evangelical Protestantism’s stress on individual salvation, proponents of civil defense stressed the need for individual choice.

Essential to the pro-fallout shelter discourse was the use of numbers and statistics. From the incipient stages of the fallout shelter debate in the late fifties, to the furor following the Berlin crisis in 1961, supporters of civil defense programs presented a picture of the number of survivors in a nuclear war in an unsheltered nation, versus the number of survivors in a sheltered nation. Drawing on data compiled for congressional studies, the numbers varied; however, infallibly consistent was the fact that millions who would otherwise perish could be saved by fallout shelters. An example published by *Time* reported on a Defense Report, commissioned by Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York State, who was one of the nation’s most fervent crusaders for fallout shelters. “Although thermonuclear war would be a major disaster,” said the task-force report, “the magnitude of the disaster can be markedly limited by protective measures.... A successful fallout protection program can give assurance of survival to millions who

---

<sup>28</sup> “To Survive Nuclear Attack: Shelter Plan Outlined in Report to Governor Rockefeller Backed,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1960, p. E8.

might otherwise die or be seriously crippled from radiation sickness.”<sup>29</sup> Other examples echoed these claims. The *New York Times* reported on a congressional study that concluded that in the event of a thermonuclear strike, “estimates included sudden death to 50,000,000 Americans and serious injury to about 20,000,000 more.”<sup>30</sup> Despite these horrific predictions, the study assured that “probably the most significant finding was that civil defense preparedness could reduce the radiation casualties from approximately 25 per cent to about 3 per cent.”<sup>31</sup> *Life* magazine, at the height of the fallout shelter debate in September 1961, devoted a cover story to the fallout shelter issue, replete with pictures and guidelines to fallout shelter construction. It assured its readers that,

if Americans took precautions against fallout the mortality could drop sharply. About five million people, less than 3% of the population, would die. This in itself is a ghastly number. But you have to look at it coldly. Unprepared, there is one chance in four that you and your family will die. Prepared, you and your family could have 97 chances out of 100 to survive.<sup>32</sup>

In an attempt to counter critics of fallout shelters, *Life* downplayed the effects of fallout, arguing, “you can recover from a mild case of radiation sickness just as you recover from a cold. It is not contagious.”<sup>33</sup>

The primary rhetorical weapon that civil defense proponents used to counter fatalism and apathy among the American public was to cite statistical evidence that purported to show the vast disparity in fatalities between a sheltered and an unsheltered

---

<sup>29</sup> “Against the Silent Killer,” *Time*, July 20, 1959, pp. 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> C.P. Trussell, “Toll of 50 Million Pictured In an Atom Attack on U.S.,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 1959, p. 1.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> “A New Urgency,” *Life*, September 15, 1961, p. 98.

<sup>33</sup> “Rundown of Things,” *Life*, September 15, 1961, p. 108.

nation in the event of a nuclear war. In addition to providing sheltered versus unsheltered mortality numbers, fallout shelter advocates utilized evidence from public opinion polls to demonstrate that regular Americans *were* in fact preparing for nuclear war. *Time* magazine reported in August of 1961 that “Despite a widespread assumption that Americans are apathetic about civil defense, the Gallup poll revealed this week that a surprising number of people are preparing for atomic attack. Reported the poll: 12 million U.S. families have already done something to get ready.”<sup>34</sup> A year later, *Time* again reported,

The fact is, a recent Roper survey sponsored by Michigan State University shows, that an overwhelming majority of the people are still very much concerned with the fallout protection program. The survey showed that 68% of the people polled backed a program for including shelter in the design of large new buildings, 77% were for converting suitable rooms and basements in schools and hospitals into shelters, shelter areas in large buildings, subways, corridors.<sup>35</sup>

The Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization (OCDM) was the source from which the majority of fallout shelter advocates obtained their information. In 1961 the OCDM released a short film called “Radiological Defense,” which embodied all the thematic elements – doom for the unprepared, and salvation for the prepared – present in pro-civil defense discourse. The familiar themes of independent action, the choice between survival and catastrophe, and the efficacy of civil defense programs, are all present in the film.<sup>36</sup> The film’s suspenseful musical score and grim narrator illustrated its

---

<sup>34</sup> “One in Five Get Ready,” *Time*, August 25, 1961, p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> “Exploded Myth,” *Time*, July 20, 1962, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> “Radiological Defense,” 1961, *The Prelinger Archives*, <http://www.archive.org/details/Radiolog1961>.

apocalyptic resonance. Fallout was represented as a dark red cloud and stock footage of people walking in cities, as well as shots of farmland, were filmed through a red filter. The narrator warned “all of us live within range of a likely target” and that an “attack could produce enough fallout to cover two thirds of the U.S.” The film becomes more hopeful when it outlines concrete OCDM measures and assured that “Most people can survive fallout if they follow OCDM guidelines.” And, stressing the need for independent action, it contended that “Every family must prepare for its own security.” The film ends on this hopeful note: “For it is an informed public that will mean the difference between success and failure in meeting this threat.”

Supporters of civil defense also argued that a national shelter system would act as an added measure of deterrence. The Soviets, the argument went, would be less likely to attack the U.S. if they knew the population was sheltered and capable of retaliating. In a message to the New York state defense council, Governor Rockefeller said that “fallout protection is essential to our military defense, our negotiating strength, to the deterrence of war and our ability to withstand nuclear blackmail.”<sup>37</sup> Essentially, proponents of fallout shelters argued that being prepared for thermonuclear war would prevent the likelihood of war occurring, which was the exact opposite of what opponents to shelters contended. Fallout shelters-as-deterrent was a contentious element of the fallout shelter debate. In a letter to the *New York Times*, a New York man wrote, “A second purpose of civil defense lies in the integral part such a program plays in our total national policy of deterrence. The knowledge of the enemy that a strong civil defense program would blunt the goals and effectiveness of his attack is deterrent in the same way as our missiles and

---

<sup>37</sup> “Facing Up to Fallout,” *Time*, February 29, 1960, p. 18.

bombers.”<sup>38</sup> To opponents of civil defense, fallout shelters made the American public accepting of war, whereas proponents believed that in preparation there was salvation.

Some proponents of fallout shelters framed the notion of salvation in explicitly Christian terms. Frank B. Ellis, a Louisiana politician and director of the civil defense agency, urged the private construction of fallout shelters. He contended that building shelters was “the Christian thing to do, the Godlike thing.”<sup>39</sup> Ellis’ slogan for promoting fallout shelters was the evangelically inspired “Revival for survival.” To elucidate his idea that building shelters was the “Christian thing to do,” Ellis reasoned: “It’s just as much a sin to commit suicide by indirection as it is to put a gun to your head and pull the trigger.” Therefore, “building a family fallout shelter is just the same as not committing suicide.”<sup>40</sup> Not all advocates of fallout shelters went this far, however. Implicit in much of the writing advocating civil defense programs was the idea that salvation was attainable through shelter building. Shelters would mean redemption for the sheltered following a nuclear apocalypse.

On the other hand, opponents of fallout shelters, coming from all segments of society – including journalists, prominent scientists, and some dissenting politicians – adopted a prophetic stance; they predicted that the fallout shelter program would not be capable of saving the nation and would only serve to hasten a nuclear holocaust. Their rhetoric, infused with apocalyptic motifs, reinforced the notion of a nation careering toward a violent end. Yet while a sense of dread and fatalism was evident in their writing many commentators were primarily concerned with opposing the government’s civil defense policies. Opponents believed the fallout shelter program represented more than

---

<sup>38</sup> “Letters: Comments on Shelters,” *The New York Times*, October 12, 1961, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> John Kay Adams, “The Reluctant Moles,” *The Nation*, November 4, 1961, p. 347.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 348-9.



an unconstructive and unwarranted government policy. The fallout shelter program represented a paradigm shift in thinking on nuclear war. The government was reorienting societal attitudes from a position where war was obsolescent and the 'balance of terror' negated nuclear aggression, to one where nuclear war was an acceptable instrument of foreign policy. This reorientation, opponents claimed, could, or would, inevitably lead to nuclear cataclysm.

Essential to fallout shelter opponents' arguments was their belief that there could be no survivable, or "limited," wars. The prominent American journalist, Hanson W. Baldwin, wrote in the *Saturday Evening Post*,

I find the notion of a "small" atomic war – one in which the obliteration of Washington and Boston, say, were exchanged for the liquidation of Moscow and Kiev – nonsensical. If the big bombs start to fall on the United States or Russia, we are, I think, in for it. There is no sense postulating a civil-defense program on the most optimistic assumptions – only on the worst.<sup>41</sup>

There was no way to prove that a war could not be "small," the only experience with nuclear war was Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but, unlike the Soviet Union in the 1960s, Japan did not have a massive thermonuclear arsenal. Therefore, it was judicious for opponents of civil defense to assume the worst. Baldwin looked to the Second World War to illustrate his point, but it was not to Hiroshima: "Politically and psychologically such a program could have a two-edged effect. It might on the one hand, create a false sense of security, distracting us from carrying out projects which offer greater promise of real security. This maginot line in psychology could cost us dearly, as it did France."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Hanson W. Baldwin, "The Case Against Fallout Shelters," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 31, 1962, p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

Looking to past examples where a false sense of security had led to drastic failures was a powerful rhetorical tool. The maginot line metaphor was used on more than one occasion by opponents of the fallout shelter program.<sup>43</sup>

The fear that featured most prominently in anti-fallout shelter writings was the belief that the fallout shelter program increased the likelihood of nuclear war. Two hundred professors from five different universities in the Boston area published an open letter in the *New York Times* explaining their worries. “It appears to us,” they argued, “that the prodigious energy of our people is being channeled into wrong directions for wrong reasons, and that continuation of this trend may be extremely dangerous to the nation and to civilization itself.”<sup>44</sup> In addition to the apocalyptic warnings about the end of civilization, these critics claimed that the construction of fallout shelters created “a false sense of possible safety and thus increases the danger of public acceptance of thermonuclear war as an instrument of national policy.”<sup>45</sup> Preparing the American public for thermonuclear war would create “war mindedness,” in turn elevating the risk of war itself.

Furthermore, civil defense committees stressed the value of shelters as a deterrent. Policymakers believed that the Soviets were less likely to chance an attack if they knew Americans would survive in their shelters, and could emerge after the first strike to deliver a punishing retaliatory blow. This was clearly faulty logic to critics of the fallout shelter-as-deterrent rationale. Roger Hagan, editor of *The Correspondent*, a Harvard based foreign policy magazine, wrote in *The Nation*, “But what is ugliest is how we prepared that man in the street. It is ugly that it should become national policy,

---

<sup>43</sup> Rose, p. 90.

<sup>44</sup> Foster Hailey, “200 Professors Say Shelters Invite War,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1961, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> “Professors Doubt Value of Shelters,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 1961, p. 12.

subscribed to by decent men, to develop among the American people a sense of courage based on the false belief in the acceptability of nuclear war, and to use this courage as a bargaining point.”<sup>46</sup> Civil defense, Hagan posits, would do nothing less than increase the “likelihood that the button will be pressed – at home by making us less hesitant.”<sup>47</sup>

Not just professors and government critics shared these fears. There is evidence of public concern over the potential of civil defense policy inviting war. In a letter to *Time*, a concerned citizen wrote,

Your cover article on civil defense (Oct. 20) is perhaps both a symptom and a cause of mankind's present retreat from the idea of obsolescence of war in the nuclear age. It seems that both we and the Russians are indeed beginning to assume our survivability as nations after such a war – if only we dig well enough beforehand. The kind of mutual self-confidence may well help to bring on the war we seek to avoid.<sup>48</sup>

This opinion mirrored the anxieties of academics and journalists, who believed that by building shelters near “our homes, schools and places of work, we would grow more tense, more anxious ... and inevitably more hostile toward the source of danger we were guarding against.”<sup>49</sup> Critics reasoned that preparing for a war that nobody wanted was counterproductive. Digging in could only help lead the nation swiftly to nuclear holocaust.

In addition to concerns over civil defense and the possibility of fallout shelters inviting war, other commentators contended that fallout shelters would provide no protection in the event of thermonuclear war. Some critics believed that civil defense officials had neglected to consider the violence and destruction inherent in thermonuclear

---

<sup>46</sup> Roger Hagan, “Shelters: When The Holocaust Comes,” *The Nation*, November 4, 1961, p. 346.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p. 347.

<sup>48</sup> “Letters: Better Ready Than Dead,” *Time*, October 27, 1961, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> “Letters to the Times: Shelter Program Opposed,” *The New York Times*, March 20, 1960, p. E10.

war. For example, the renowned science fiction novelist, Philip Wylie, who was a great contributor to the body of nuclear themed literature, cast his doubts on survivability in a letter to the *Saturday Evening Post*. He argued that civil defense was contingent on the eventuality of only one attack, but he wrote, “why should an enemy, intent on destroying us, limit his attacks to one? Why not two – or ten – spread over weeks or months?”<sup>50</sup> Wylie also mentioned the possibility of firestorms covering expansive areas in the event of a nuclear attack, setting “vast fire storms, roasting or smothering all those in private or public urban shelters.” Lastly, he questioned the effect of a bombing on human subsistence, which “might well be impossible” because of a “chain of life ... broken at many points by fallout accumulated in living plants and other organisms.”<sup>51</sup> Opponents of fallout shelter programs were quick to list all the horrific possibilities that civil defense officials and proponents of a national shelter system failed to mention when advocating their policies.

Apart from the apocalyptic prognostications of critics who feared fallout shelters would invite war, or the opinions of media commentators who believed that American cities would be reduced to ashes in the event of an attack, some people believed that public money would be better spent elsewhere. Although anticommunism had receded from the paranoid levels of the early fifties, one Floridian wrote a letter to the *Saturday Evening Post* agreeing with Hanson Baldwin’s opposition to fallout shelters. “I don’t consider myself a fatalist in the least,” she wrote. “With three small children, whom I’d rather have ‘dead than red,’ I agree with the author that we would do better to aid our schools with \$7,000,000,000. Children’s minds are more in danger from Communism

---

<sup>50</sup> “Letters: Civil Defense ‘Disgrace’” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 15, 1959, pp. 4-6.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 4-6.

than their bodies.”<sup>52</sup> Her opposition, although not explicitly apocalyptic, still resonates with a sense of futility. The writer, although perhaps not a ‘fatalist,’ would still rather see her children “dead than red.”

Amidst the hysteria over shelters in 1961, one controversial strain of thought emerged that confronted the potentialities of thermonuclear war. ‘Shelter morality,’ as it was generally known, questioned whether standard societal mores would apply in the event of nuclear war.<sup>53</sup> Shelter owners feared the intrusion of their unprepared neighbours, if the bomb dropped and created lawless chaos. The mainstream media was quick to pick up stories of Americans preparing for such grim eventualities. At the height of the shelter furor in the late summer of 1961, an article appearing in *Time*, titled “Gun Thy Neighbor,” chronicled a number of these cases. One Chicago suburbanite told *Time* that,

When I get my shelter finished, I'm going to mount a machine gun at the hatch to keep the neighbors out if the bomb falls. I'm deadly serious about this. If the stupid American public will not do what they have to to save themselves, I'm not going to run the risk of not being able to use the shelter I've taken the trouble to provide to save my own family.<sup>54</sup>

In Austin, Texas, a man who was showing off his shelter to the media pointed to its four-inch wooden door and its accompanying .357 magnum, and claimed, “This isn't to keep

---

<sup>52</sup> “Letters: Fallout Shelters Debated,” *Saturday Evening Post*, April 5, 1962, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> Another aspect of fallout shelter morality that is not dealt with in this study, is what Elaine Tyler May identifies as the reinforcing of traditional gender roles by civil defense officials. The fallout shelter, like the home, “infused the traditional role of women in the home with new meaning and importance, which would in turn help to fortify the homes as a place of security amid the cold war. In the ultimate chaos of an atomic attack, appropriate gender roles would presumably prevail.” Elaine Tyler May, “Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb,” in Lary May, (ed.), *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 163.

<sup>54</sup> “Gun Thy Neighbor?” *Time*, August 18, 1961, p. 58.

radiation out, it's to keep people out.”<sup>55</sup> On a less personal scale, Las Vegas’ civil defense leader proposed a 5,000-man militia to ward off nuclear war refugees flooding in from California “like a swarm of locusts.”<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the Civil Defense Coordinator of Beaumont, California recommended, “all citizens to arm themselves with guns to repel the hundreds of thousands of refugees who would flee that way if Los Angeles were bombed.”<sup>57</sup> In addition to the biblical image of “a swarm of locusts,” these examples indicate a belief in the need for personal action to secure salvation. Furthermore, it accesses an apocalyptic mode of thought that believes only an exclusive group, in this case the sheltered, would emerge from the wreckage of doomsday.

Controversy over the gun-thy-neighbor” issue intensified when some prominent members of the clergy sanctioned violence at the shelter door. The Rev. L.C. McHugh, former professor of ethics at Georgetown University and associate editor of *America*, a Jesuit weekly, wrote, “If you are secure in your shelter and others try to break in, they may be treated as unjust aggressors and repelled with whatever means will effectively deter the assault.”<sup>58</sup> He further suggested, “Does prudence also dictate that you have some ‘protective device,’ e.g. a revolver for breaking up traffic jams at your shelter door? That’s for you to decide.”<sup>59</sup> Also, Dr. Earl Kalland, the dean of Denver’s Baptist Seminary reasoned, “If you allow a tramp to take the place of your children in your shelter, you are in error. A Christian has the obligation to ensure the safety of those dependent on him.”<sup>60</sup> These views are illustrative of the belief in a violent apocalypse,

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>57</sup> “Shelters: When The Holocaust Comes,” p. 341.

<sup>58</sup> “The Reluctant Moles,” p. 349.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 349.

<sup>60</sup> “Gun Thy Neighbor?” p. 58.

and the dutiful Christian would survive – is destined to survive – to begin again in a post-apocalyptic world.

Numerous detractors emerged, most of whom regarded this brand of ‘shelter morality’ as callous, if not categorically *immoral*. One of the most eloquent arguments came from the anthropologist Margaret Mead. There was prescience in her statement: “Looking critically at our own responses to the shelter issue, we could comfortably decide that they reflect no more than a temporary hysteria which need not be taken seriously.”<sup>61</sup> However, she was not dismissive of the fallout shelter’s effect on American culture. She described the European reception to reports of Americans preparing to ward off their neighbours with guns. Many Europeans had memories of sharing shelters in WWII and “took these stories as one more example of Americans’ inexplicable affinity for violence. In their eyes, Americans had accepted the idea of war – a war that would destroy the rest of mankind – for the sake of a set of principles that, if these stories were to be believed, would stand up to a single bombing.” Mead suggested that “Perhaps the world did not have to wait for a nuclear war to bring about the physical dissolution of civilization: perhaps it was dissolving morally now.”<sup>62</sup> Her analysis of the American fallout shelter debate demonstrated the prevalence of the secular apocalyptic narrative.

An essential element of apocalyptic discourse involved the image of the post-apocalyptic world. In the fallout shelter debate two distinct and opposite perspectives were at work. Although diametrically opposed, they were both equally dependent on the secular apocalyptic. First, Americans who chose to build fallout shelters, and those who supported the fallout shelter program, believed that the nation would emerge from their

---

<sup>61</sup> Margaret Mead, “Are Shelters the Answer?” *The New York Times*, November 26, 1961, p. SM29.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, p. SM29.

shelters unscathed to rebuild and reinvigorate American institutions and life. Sheltered Americans were “custodians of the American tradition.”<sup>63</sup> They had faith that “the U.S. could almost surely arise from the rubble, fight back, survive, put together a society again and, ultimately, prosper once more.”<sup>64</sup> Fallout shelters were “crucial to the continued survival of Western ideals and institutions.”<sup>65</sup> The exclusive group of Americans who chose shelter over fatalism were the kind of Americans who would ensure that life would progress, perhaps in a simpler and more purified world.<sup>66</sup> There was even an element of the sheltered as an exclusive group of the elect or redeemed. An example, one American nailed a sign to his shelter door that broadcasted his almost perverse delight in the knowledge that “He who lasts, laughs.”<sup>67</sup>

The second post-apocalyptic view was grimmer. It was also a vision more popular and ubiquitous in articles written on the fallout shelter debate in the late fifties and early sixties. It envisioned a life underground for the American nation. It held that “Eventually most human life will be underground, confronted by arsenals capable of destroying all life over the land areas of the earth.”<sup>68</sup> To put it bluntly, “the lives of even sheltered survivors of full-fledged nuclear war will hardly be worth living. After a month or so of cowering underground, they will emerge into a shattered and sickly world. Most of their countrymen will be dead, and a large part of the living can count on developing cancer or other diseases caused by radiation.”<sup>69</sup> Life could persist, but “survival in a nuclear attack

---

<sup>63</sup> “One Town’s ‘Great Debate,’” p. 9.

<sup>64</sup> “The Sheltered Life,” p. 25.

<sup>65</sup> “Coffins or Shields?” p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> Wojcik, p. 105.

<sup>67</sup> “Coffins or Shields?” p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> Harrison Brown & James Real, *Community of Fear* (Santa Barbara: Center for The Study of Democratic Institutions, 1960), p. 39.

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan N. Leonard, “For Survivors, Life Won’t Be Worth Living,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 1960, p. BR 20.



is meaningless.”<sup>70</sup> This side of the secular apocalyptic coin regarded human life following a nuclear holocaust as something that would be diseased, meaningless, and subterranean. This belief contributed to the widespread fatalism with which the American public faced both fallout shelters and the prospect of nuclear war. By 1963 it was evident that Americans would “rather think of other things.”<sup>71</sup>

The fallout shelter debate forced Americans to think about last things. Opponents and advocates of shelters alike both accessed a readily available apocalyptic discourse to frame their predictions and opinions. However, this apocalyptic moment in American culture was short lived. During the Cuban missile crisis, a group of reporters asked Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara what was being done to protect civilians against a possible nuclear attack, he answered “‘civil defense’ and the reporters burst into laughter.”<sup>72</sup> Indeed, “nothing had seemed deader than the fallout shelter program, contaminated by skepticism, cynicism and apathy,” claimed *Time* magazine in September of 1963.<sup>73</sup> But during the hysteria over fallout shelters, Americans confronted a very real nuclear threat, made explicit by the Berlin Crisis and Kennedy’s subsequent Berlin speech. The frustrations, fears, and the powerlessness that permeated the fallout shelter debate proved too exhausting for American society. The threat did not retreat, the fallout shelter as a program and an idea was barely breathing by the time Americans faced the most immediate peril over Cuba. Rather, Americans chose, by will or by weakness, to think of other things.

---

<sup>70</sup> “Apathy on Shelters,” *The New York Times*, June 2, 1963, p. 158.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>72</sup> “Survival of the Fewest,” *Saturday Evening Post*, March 23, 1963, pp. 17-21.

<sup>73</sup> “Revival of Survival,” *Time*, September 27, 1963, p. 21.



### Chapter 3: Thinking About the Unthinkable

Mainstream media commentators approached nuclear issues from a number of angles. Despite the variance of concern and opinion, it is evident that this discourse conformed to an apocalyptic framework – one that was distinctly secular. Following the launch of Sputnik in 1957, the still embryonic atomic age entered a new phase. Now nuclear death, delivered on the wings of rockets, could occur in a matter of minutes. The continued evolution of thermonuclear weapons with constantly increasing yields meant Americans had to consider bombs thousands of times more powerful than those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Because Hiroshima provided the only imagery available, outside of the relatively sterile pictures and newsreels of AEC tests, it was no stretch of logic for Americans to visualize entire continents charred and ruined – an entire nation pictured as a vast Hiroshima-like wasteland.<sup>1</sup> The American media confronted these grim possibilities with distinctly eschatological language, developing a secular apocalyptic discourse that conformed – in varying degrees – to a pre-existing prophetic framework. Media images reveal distinctly apocalyptic musings and the formulation of new temporal perceptions. On occasion commentators employed apocalyptic writing metaphorically; not all believed humanity faced a fiery end. However, some made literal pronouncements that took nuclear war – not only seriously – but as inevitable. This chapter will trace the various themes and issues covered by the media – from Sputnik to the Limited test ban in 1963 – that viewed nuclear issues through an apocalyptic lens. These included writing about the potentialities of thermonuclear war, the prophetic role of science and scientists,

---

<sup>1</sup> For a good survey of the development of atomic bomb imagery see Peter B. Hales, “The Atomic Sublime,” *American Studies*, 31 (2) (1991) pp. 5-30.

the fate of atomic refugees, and the nuclear genre in literature. Although these are distinct topics, the media treated each extensively, and each possessed comparable traits that conformed to the secular apocalyptic. In addition, the examples from the nuclear genre – *On the Beach* and *Fail-Safe* – are included as they sparked wider debate in the media and provided imaginary scenarios around which many articles were constructed. Finally, it will consider the role of the Cuban missile crisis and the test ban in first intensifying and then subduing the nuclear apocalyptic.

Many writers in this period accorded their era a unique temporal space in history. The bomb, regarded as unprecedented in both its destructive power and its effect on human affairs, called for a reorganizing of human chronology. The atomic age, more specifically, the bomb, placed civilization in “a new, painful and utterly bewildering situation, for which there is no precedent in history.”<sup>2</sup> Eugen Weber identifies apocalyptic millennialism as contingent on temporal specificity, positing that millennialism “identified crisis with the end of a particular chronological circle.”<sup>3</sup> The late fifties and early sixties in America were indeed times of crisis, with the continual prospect of thermonuclear war. In 1960, the novelist Arthur Koestler, wrote an article, “Reflections On the Year 15 P.H.,” for the *New York Times*. 15 P.H. meant fifteen years post-Hiroshima. Koestler argued, “the positing of a year Zero provides a time-scale, the measure of the age, of the distance covered, from the real or assumed starting point of a given civilization.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the logic followed that the bomb required civilization to start from a new beginning. The reason for this chronological reorientation was because

---

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Lort-Phillips, “The Useless Weapon,” *The Nation*, August 15, 1959, p. 71.

<sup>3</sup> Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Koestler, “Reflection on the Year 15 P.H.” *The New York Times*, March 20, 1960, p. SM29.

“the essence of this transformation could be defined as follows: hitherto man had to live with the ideas of his death as an individual; from now onward mankind will have to live with the idea of its death as a species.”<sup>5</sup> Koestler compared the new reality with Christian prophecy, beginning at the Creation and ending with the Last Judgment. “We again feel that the Last Judgment may take place in the foreseeable future.”<sup>6</sup> The difference between the biblical prophetic vision and his secular one was a distinction between the end of civilization and the end of the world: “the world will go on, even if mankind does not.” Apocalyptic discourse – and the secular is no exception – places human history on a linear trajectory toward cosmic revelation. Writers situating the nuclear era in a new temporality were doing so via an existing framework. Although Koestler might not have intended to substitute one linear chronology ending in apocalypse for another, this is essentially what he did.

Koestler was not alone in counting the years since the first deployment of the bomb. An article that appeared in *The Nation* in 1962 looked at the twenty years since American physicists had unleashed the power of the atom. It described the discovery in mythic terms:

Mind and matter, locked in the most intense and desperate embrace ever essayed, gave birth to a savior-monster the like of which man heretofore could contemplate only in story. Fire, steel and pestilence were welded into one: Prometheus, Daedalus and Pandora incarnated as Fermi, Compton and Zinn. Once again, myth became history.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. SM29.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. SM88.

<sup>7</sup> Huston Smith, “Living With Apocalypse: Twenty Years of the Atom,” *The Nation*, December 15, 1962, p. 421.

Here the bomb itself was accorded cosmic proportions. Its energy and power, a mystery to the layperson, allowed, if not led, writers to characterize its discovery as a metaphysical moment in human history that started time anew. An American atomic test director, interviewed in *Time*, commented that the bomb was “a little universe unto itself, one in which we don’t know the detailed physical laws which govern it.”<sup>8</sup> Only atomic physicists, privy to arcane knowledge, could decipher its secrets, which vaulted scientists to prophet status. Western civilization is prone to celebrating anniversaries of all types; the essential difference in these conceptions of time, from, say a nation’s centennial, was that they did not mark a block of time in a continuing chronology, but counted from the beginning of a new epoch.

Thermonuclear testing, particularly tests carried out by the Soviets, fostered apocalyptic musings in the media which often began by reciting technical details: “The thermonuclear explosion now promised by Mr. Khrushchev, equivalent in power to 50,000,000 tons of TNT, would be twenty-five hundred times more powerful than the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”<sup>9</sup> After contemplating this “dreadful lexicon of Armageddon which is the product of the nuclear age,” writers often moved to consider the possible implications of an all-out conflagration. These implications were rarely anything less than starkly apocalyptic warnings, written with a profound sense of foreboding. This example warned, “The sky is the limit; and man can, if man is irrational enough to do it, blow himself and the world to smithereens.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, there was a distinct sense that the vast network of thermonuclear weapons was connected to one button, which would unleash nuclear holocaust. In language linked

---

<sup>8</sup> “U.S. Test Director,” *Time*, April 20, 1962, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> “Strategy of Terror,” *The New York Times*, October 19, 1961, p. 34.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

to postwar technological progress, the push button – a common household object – was inextricable linked to the bomb and “would trigger atomic war as surely as a housewife could activate her dishwasher.”<sup>11</sup> Nuclear fear, and the apocalyptic discourse that emerged in the atomic age, was not a fear of *a* bomb, but *the* bomb. The push button imagery reinforced its singularity. An editorial in the *Saturday Evening Post*, “Getting Ready for Armageddon,” was a good example of this imagery: “Let us hope for the best but anticipate the worst, Nikita Khrushchev – or one of his enemies who wrests control from him – unleashes all the accumulated demons of history by pressing the button on thermonuclear war.”<sup>12</sup> The secular apocalyptic discourse evident in the American media’s reporting on nuclear issues did not temper its prognostications, predictions, and possibilities, with concerns over ‘one’ bomb. Rather, the words “accumulated demons,” chosen by the *Saturday Evening Post*, effectively demonstrate that commentators considered the ‘bomb’ as the vast network of nuclear weapons in American and Soviet control.

Faced with the grim exigencies of the thermonuclear era, many writers attempted to articulate the American cultural climate. In doing so, different strains of a discursively apocalyptic style emerged. One writer admitted, “There is obviously a good deal of searching for the silver lining in the mushroom cloud.”<sup>13</sup> He found little reason for hope, although he looked at religion as a possible avenue for solace. However, he concluded that “although religious faith may give the individual hope of a life beyond the world’s mass-death,” it did little to allay anxiety until that penultimate moment came.<sup>14</sup> Rather,

---

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hine, *Populuxe* (New York: MJF, 1999), p. 132.

<sup>12</sup> “Getting Ready for Armageddon,” *Saturday Evening Post*, March 3, 1962, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> R.D. Lakin, “Nuclear Nirvana,” *The Nation*, September 29, 1962, p. 179.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

utilizing an atomic analogy common to the period, he wrote, “the masses dwell in a daydream of peace composed of highly fissionable materials,” and placed humanity firmly in “the radioactive twilight of the human age.”<sup>15</sup> The late fifties and early sixties was rife with fear and uncertainty and there was little ammunition with which to counter the apocalyptic conclusion that humanity had reached the “twilight” of its age.

Other commentators contended that America was a society in search of faith and worried that anxieties shaped by a sense of inadequacy and frustration “could produce an outburst of destructive fury, ostensibly toward an enemy.”<sup>16</sup> This destructive outburst, a writer in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* speculated,

could be motivated by an unconscious effort to annihilate from consciousness – even if it means destroying that consciousness forever – the sense of guilt, of frustration, of inadequacy, which today confronts so many of the political and intellectual leaders of this society. War could be a way to wipe the personal, national, and international slate clean.

17

An essential element of the biblical apocalyptic is present here in refracted form: the idea that civilization is lost, immoral, and unredeemable, and can only be restored by divine, apocalyptic intervention. Here, society is plagued by feelings of frustration and inadequacy, rather than immorality and backsliding and earthly nuclear Armageddon is substituted for divine apocalyptic intervention. Similarly, an article appeared in *Time*, which argued that although the possibility of civilization’s total destruction was often cited as a central cause of anxiety, “the bomb is merely a handy device, welcomed with

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

<sup>16</sup> Donald N. Michael, “Psychopathology of Nuclear War,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 1962, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 28.



almost relief, for the release of anxiety and guilt.”<sup>18</sup> Keeping in tune with apocalyptic narratives, the article figured that “For many Bomb worriers, it seems to be a true phobia, a kind of secular substitute for the Last Judgment, and a truly effective nuclear ban would undoubtedly deprive them of a highly comforting sense of doom.”<sup>19</sup> Millenarians are often possessive of a perverse sense of self-importance, as they believe that they are participants in the cosmic drama that will end in the culmination of history. The best-selling premillennial author of the 1970s, Hal Lindsay, labeled them members of the “terminal generation.”<sup>20</sup> The commentator in *Time* identified this trait in “Bomb worriers” without explicitly making the connection to millennial movements. Regardless, a distinct secular apocalyptic narrative was at work in media commentary on the bomb.

Nuclear issues pervaded commentary on potential problems ostensibly unrelated to thermonuclear war. A conservationist wrote in *Harper's* of his concern that the nation was heedlessly plundering its natural resources. However, he framed his debate by utilizing the nuclear apocalyptic: “Indeed our scientists have already lifted a mountain a few inches into the air, with an underground explosion. We cannot today look upon the noblest mountain with any certainty that it will outlast even us.”<sup>21</sup> He blamed a fatalistic outlook for the wanton consumption and destruction of America's environment. Indeed, he argued, “Looking at American life today, you sometimes have the impression of a people who have heard on good authority that the world is about to end and are bent on getting all they can while the going is good.”<sup>22</sup> In similar fashion, the *New York Times* featured an article that prophesied the catastrophic consequences of the rising global

---

<sup>18</sup> “The Anatomy of Angst,” *Time*, March 31, 1961, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>20</sup> Wojcik, p. 144.

<sup>21</sup> Charlton Ogburn, Jr., “America The Expendable,” *Harper's*, August 1960, p. 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

population. The article, entitled “Problem No. 2,” referenced ‘problem no. 1,’ which was, of course, nuclear war and relied on the climate of nuclear fear to legitimize apocalyptic predictions about the population crisis: “The prophets of cosmic doom have differed in their forecasts of how the human race will be extinguished – by fire, the militant wrath of God etc. But the rising birth rate ... is a warning to humanity that it is drifting to self-destruction.”<sup>23</sup> While not attempting to displace the nuclear apocalyptic, these articles hitched their wagons to the more prominent discourse.

A predominant fear in the late fifties and early sixties was that the massive deterrent apparatus which constituted the ‘balance of terror’ in the Cold War would break down and thermonuclear war would start by mistake or accident. Despite government assurances that the system was infallible, and that no missile could launch by mistake, numerous articles were concerned with just that. A Democratic congressman used this analogy: “If you place six chimpanzees in a small room with a couple of baskets of live hand grenades, a minor catastrophe is inevitable. If you place error-prone human beings in proximity to thousands of nuclear weapons, a major catastrophe is inevitable and the triggering of an all-out massive exchange is probable.”<sup>24</sup> Defense strategy required that nuclear weapons were in a constant state of instant readiness. Therefore, the media contemplated numerous scenarios, examples of meteors, ducks, cargo planes etc. misinterpreted on American or Soviet radar, which could lead to a nuclear conflagration. The danger was real, as *Harper's* editor John Fisher warned: “If a button was pushed by accident, there goes Moscow (or Leningrad or Kiev), and here comes the war which

---

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Krock, “Problem No. 2,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 1962, p. 217.

<sup>24</sup> Charles O. Porter, “Accident or Aggression?” *The Nation*, March 5, 1960, p. 202.

would wipe out maybe most of the human race; so there can be no accidents.”<sup>25</sup> Bertrand Russell, a staunch disarmament advocate, contended that “human beings live at the moment in immediate danger of total annihilation ... the entire apparatus of global butchery depends upon radar which is incapable of distinguishing natural phenomena from missiles.”<sup>26</sup> The main anxiety was not one isolated accident involving nuclear weapons, rather it was the fear that one accident would “spark an all-out nuclear war, which would destroy everything, everywhere.”<sup>27</sup>

In fact, by 1960 the SAC was not without a frightening record of accidents. Although nuclear weapons could never be armed without direct orders from the president, SAC bombers suffered a number of accidents in the late 1950s. A B-47 dropped a bomb accidentally while flying over South Carolina, due to a malfunction in the release mechanism, and the TNT detonator exploded on impact, releasing radiation and destroying part of a farmer’s barn.<sup>28</sup> On July 6, 1959, a bomber crashed at the end of its runway in Little Rock, catching fire. In October of the same year, a B-52 laden with thermonuclear weapons collided with a jet tanker during refueling; it exploded and claimed the lives of a number of airmen.<sup>29</sup> In all these cases, the nuclear warheads did not detonate. These ‘Broken Arrow’ incidents, while not the same kind of nuclear accident feared by writers on the subject, discredited the military’s ‘infallibility of the deterrent’ argument.

---

<sup>25</sup> John Fischer, “Sixty Ivory Towers Forty Feet Underground,” *Harper’s*, May 1962, p. 15.

<sup>26</sup> “Bertrand Russell on The Sinful Americans: A Somewhat Frustrating Exchange of Letters,” *Harper’s*, June 1963, p. 21.

<sup>27</sup> Brigadier C.M. Barclay, (ret.), “A Very Real Risk – War By Accident,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 1963, p. 229.

<sup>28</sup> Pat Frank, “Are We Safe From Our Own Bombs?” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 23, 1960, vol. 233, iss. 4, p. 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 50-54.

A group of academics from Ohio State University composed a report that concluded that there was “a significant chance that a major accidental war may occur at some time in the nineteen sixties.”<sup>30</sup> They listed a number of potential scenarios: accidental nuclear explosions; faulty radar reports; “human aberrations,” which included “irresponsible or deranged leadership or sabotage by friendly personnel” (see: General Ripper in the Stanley Kubrick film, *Dr. Strangelove*; 1964); the spread of limited war; and “failures in brinkmanship.”<sup>31</sup> The spread of limited war was particularly interesting. ‘Limited war’ in the early sixties was a policy proposal advocated by some government representatives to use only ‘small,’ or tactical, nuclear weapons to resolve conflicts. However, most commentators thought the idea of limited war with nuclear weapons untenable, because it would inevitably escalate to a full-scale thermonuclear war. An anonymous poem in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, called “On Limited Warfare” illustrated the fears of escalation:

Don'tcha worry, honey chile,  
 Don'tcha cry no more;  
 It's jest a li'l ole atom bomb  
 In a li'l ole lim'ted war.

It's jest a bitsy warhead, chile,  
 On a li'l ole tactical shell,  
 And all it'll do is blow us—all  
 To a li'l ole lim'ted hell.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> “Chances of a War in 60s Reported: A Study Explores Likelihood of Unintentional Conflict and Nuclear Accident,” *The New York Times*, July 4, 1960, p. 28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> “On Limited Warfare,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 1959, p. 343.

A nuclear accident, regardless of how the mistake would manifest itself, was a distinct concern in this period. Although different types of accidents were predicted, the result was the same. There was a pervasive belief that a nuclear accident was possible, if not inevitable, and that one such accident would lead to nuclear Armageddon.

One of the most influential peddlers of the secular apocalyptic in this period was Herman Kahn, the RAND Corporation scientist and consultant to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and Office of Civil Defense and Mobilization (OCDM). His writing appeared in both mainstream and technical journals and attempted to shake America's faith in the stability of the 'balance of terror.' His magnum opus, the lengthy *On Thermonuclear War*, was a "ponderous shocker"<sup>33</sup> met with both fervent criticism and grim agreement. Kahn's apocalypticism was unique. His efforts to force both the public and policymakers to "think about the unthinkable" played a significant role in shifting nuclear thought from an unmitigated faith in the infallible deterrent, to one that seriously considered all of thermonuclear war's macabre potentialities. This discursive shift was evident in articles on Kahn, such as the following in *Time*:

During the H-bomb years it has become commonplace to say that nuclear war is 'unthinkable' or 'suicidal' or 'preposterous,' that it would bring 'mutual annihilation' or 'the end of civilization'.... Kahn's basic point is that nuclear war need not bring an inevitable 'end of civilization' or even the 'mutual annihilation' of the combatants. It is a part of U.S. Atomic Age folklore that there is no use trying to prepare for nuclear attack, that once deterrence fails all is lost.<sup>34</sup>

Kahn argued that thermonuclear war was both feasible and winnable. *On Thermonuclear War* was loaded with tables, graphs, and statistics, which coldly calculated the number of

<sup>33</sup> "rx for Doomsday," *Time*, November 24, 1961, p. 63.

<sup>34</sup> "The Waning Nuclear Deterrent," *Time*, January 2, 1961, p. 16.

expected American dead and considered such questions as “Will the survivors envy the dead?”<sup>35</sup>

Many from the ranks of atomic scientists and mainstream journalists found his sterile analysis of a potential nuclear holocaust ghoulish and fear mongering. He belittled this criticism in an article he wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post*:

I have been criticized severely for spending any time at all on the problems of fighting, surviving and ending such wars. To many, this is an unthinkable subject; any attempt to think about it is either evil or insane. This criticism is not really personal; it simply reflects the fact that we Americans are not prepared to face reality, that we transfer our horror of thermonuclear war to reports about the realities of thermonuclear war.<sup>36</sup>

Khan shaped his theory in direct opposition to those who thought of thermonuclear war “as a sort of end of history.”<sup>37</sup> However, although his intent was to persuade those who “assume an attitude of fatalism” to consider what survival would entail in the event of nuclear war, his approach was discursively apocalyptic.<sup>38</sup> Kahn’s apocalypse was redemptive. He argued that, despite the millions of Americans dead<sup>39</sup> and shattered economic and social institutions, there would be survival and reorganization following nuclear cataclysm. But, redemption was contingent on action. Although he cloaked his analysis in the unassailable mantles of statistics and science, he was not one to avoid sweeping, eschatological prophecy. For example, Kahn predicted that “unless man does rouse his full mental equipment and masters his technology, he will be in trouble, and the

---

<sup>35</sup> Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 40.

<sup>36</sup> Herman Kahn, “We’re Too Scared to Think,” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 16, 1961, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Herman Kahn, “How Many Can Be Saved?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 1959, p. 30.

<sup>38</sup> “We’re Too Scared to Think,” p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Herman Kahn analyzed a countless number of scenarios and situations in his over-600 page book *On Thermonuclear War*. Therefore, there is not enough space to analyze all his prognostications. An example of one of his more dire calculations was his contention that under the worst circumstances, 160 million Americans would die in a thermonuclear attack and it would take over 100 years to recuperate. Khan, p. 20.

whole world may be in danger of annihilation.”<sup>40</sup> The prediction that the “whole world may be in danger of annihilation” flew in the face of the deductive, mathematical reasoning he used to reach his other conclusions. Although contradictory, it is further evidence that Khan was a secular apocalypticist par excellence.

*On Thermonuclear War* was a frightening tome. However, one idea that resonated with critics was Kahn’s “Doomsday Machine.” It was a hypothetical machine, which consisted of a network of nuclear weapons “whose only function is to destroy all human life.”<sup>41</sup> Kahn believed that Doomsday Machines “are likely to be better than any current or proposed competitor for deterrence.”<sup>42</sup> A commentator in *Time* accused Kahn of callousness, arguing that he mentioned the weapon and “discussed its uses as calmly as if it were a bug killer.”<sup>43</sup> Although government officials never considered it seriously, the doomsday bomb won some adherents in strategic defense circles, as it seemed an invulnerable deterrent. *The Nation* caustically ridiculed Kahn’s Doomsday Machine by taking his logic further:

Suppose that there are two Russians or even a couple of Russian dogs on that satellite when the “Doomsday bomb” goes off. Clearly we have failed to reduce “survivability” to zero. We need a “Doomsday moon bomb” – one capable of destroying mankind on earth but on the moon as well, preferably simultaneously. Without such a deterrent we are at the absolute mercy of the enemy.<sup>44</sup>

Although this article is an example of *reductio ad absurdum* it reflects an inherent tone of frustration that Kahn’s apocalyptic rationalism was accorded any attention at all.

---

<sup>40</sup> “We’re Too Scared to Think,” p. 14.

<sup>41</sup> Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War*, p. 45.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>43</sup> “rx for Doomsday,” p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> George G. Kirstein, “Non-Survivability Plus,” *The Nation*, March 5, 1960, p. 203.

Although Kahn was indeed a scientist – albeit one affiliated with the government – his opinions and philosophy were unique. However, the wider American scientific community was equally important. American scientists, as they were the progenitors of the atomic bomb and the definitive source of predictions on nuclear issues, were the central source for secular apocalyptic discourse in the atomic age. As the proprietors of atomic knowledge – too technical and arcane for laypeople to understand – their predictions and opinions resonated with a quasi-divine authority. Indeed, scientists were the secular prophets of the age. By no means unanimously comfortable with their role as prophets, they nevertheless adopted and adapted elements of traditional biblical prophecy to their own discourse. In fact, I believe that Norman Cohn’s analysis of medieval millennial movements is useful here. Cohn’s characterization of “*prophetae*,” as the intellectuals or “half-intellectuals” who initiated millennial movements by drawing on a variety of apocalyptic materials and purveyed their ideas to laypeople, can certainly be applied to scientists in the atomic age.<sup>45</sup> Cohn’s “*prophetae*” believed they were offering their followers “the prospect of carrying out a divinely ordained mission of stupendous, unique importance.”<sup>46</sup> Similarly, scientists often characterized the bomb as something of divine importance, and the exigencies of nuclear war were both the source of their prophecy and the cause of their prophetic mission.<sup>47</sup>

The touchstone of atomic scientists’ apocalypticism was the influential *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which reproduced the Doomsday Clock, archetypal symbol of secular apocalypse, on the cover of each issue, with the proximity of the minute hand to

---

<sup>45</sup> Cohn, pp. 281-84.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 285.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, p. 2. See also Paul Boyer, *By the Bombs Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985).



“midnight” reflecting the international situation. The *Bulletin's* Doomsday Clock was an example of the secular apocalyptic borrowing directly from the biblical; they used biblical prophecy (from the book of Peter) to describe “atomic midnight.” The Doomsday Clock was supposed to count the minutes until “the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 Peter 3:10).”<sup>48</sup> The *Bulletin's* pages were filled with apocalyptic warnings on the possibilities of nuclear war and commentary on issues ranging from Sputnik to fallout, as well as some outside the nuclear realm. Reinforcing the notion of scientist as prophet was the belief that science itself was history’s prime mover. The editor of the *Bulletin*, the biophysicist and contributor to the Manhattan Project, Eugene Rabinowitch, wrote,

History knows periods of flourishing art, soaring religion, and accomplished statecraft – and periods of their decay. Certain heights reached in the past have never been reached again. Science, however, knows only growth. Its advance may be faster or slower, but it is always moving forward, never backward.<sup>49</sup>

Although the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* was a journal that frequently lamented the achievements of science, there was a persistent belief that science was humanity’s saviour and not its destroyer. Rabinowitch’s teleology reflects that position. He contended, in postmillennial fashion, “Scientists must be pioneers in establishing the one

---

<sup>48</sup> Weber, p. 201.

<sup>49</sup> Eugene Rabinowitch, “Man Must Prevail,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1962, p. 4.

world of man, because theirs is the first common enterprise that has now become the most important content of history.”<sup>50</sup>

Although some scientists were confident that science could usher in a peaceful millennium, others concluded that humanity would reach a different end. Conscious of the power of their prophetic role, scientists reminded the public that “the present age lives in the shadow of the possibility of a war which, in one way or another, will be capable of extinguishing civilized life on the planet.”<sup>51</sup> Scientists, as prophets of nuclear Armageddon, warned of a number of catastrophic scenarios in the event of thermonuclear war. These ranged from warnings that the result of a nuclear attack would mean “everyone and everything would probably be subjected to a grave thermal hazard and many consumed in the holocaust,”<sup>52</sup> to predictions that nuclear war would “in effect turn over a ruined world to wildly proliferating insects and bacteria.... [T]he cockroach will take over the habitations of the foolish humans.”<sup>53</sup> These prophecies, one astute commentator observed, increased the anxieties of the public. He recognized that the American public

Stands before the authority in science much as his medieval counterpart stood before the priest. Unlike his predecessor, however, he does not learn unambiguously which road leads to salvation and which to perdition. Some teach that men must make weapons fearsome enough to outlaw war through terror. Others maintain pleadingly that total

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, “Living With ‘the Bomb,’” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1962, p. BR22. This article was a review of Sir. Robert Watson-Watt’s book, *Man’s Means To His End*. Watson-Watt was a scientist and is considered the inventor of radar.

<sup>52</sup> John W. Finney, “Scientists Revise View On Fall-Out: Immediate Danger Put Too Low,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1959, p. 6.

<sup>53</sup> Milton Bracker “Atomic War Held Threat To Nature: Only Insects and Bacteria Will Survive, Scientist Says,” *The New York Times*, June 17, 1962, p. 46.

dismantling of atomic weapons is the one means to safety and sanity. Rarely since the Middle Ages has our future been painted in such apocalyptic colors.<sup>54</sup>

This commentator correctly recognizes that there was no consensus among scientists on nuclear weapons: some prophesied doom, others salvation.

Dr. Edward Teller, unlike the majority of his fellow atomic physicists, was assertively anti-disarmament and believed that nuclear weapons were an effective and necessary instrument of foreign policy. Furthermore, he was a crusader for the use of the “peaceful atom,” a policy initiative deserted by most after Eisenhower’s unsuccessful “atoms for peace” campaign.<sup>55</sup> In an article in *Reader’s Digest*, Teller described Project Plowshare. It was an initiative that proposed to use hydrogen bombs to dig water level canals, eliminate rapids from rivers, mine low-grade ores, create subterranean rivers in desert ecosystems, and create harbours.<sup>56</sup> Teller observed that the name of the project, a direct biblical reference from the Book of Isaiah,

Remembers the good advice of the Bible on the conversion of swords, we call this ‘Project Plowshare’.... For if nations cooperate in the peaceful development of our most awesome weapon of war, then perhaps the Biblical prophecy will be fulfilled: ‘Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.’<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> “Chances of a War in 60s Reported,” p. 28.

<sup>55</sup> Commentators in the early 1960s recognized that the idea of the peaceful atom, which was prevalent in the 1950s under Eisenhower’s atoms for peace program, seemed to have vanished. One writer attributed it to the transition from the “Age of the Atom to the Age of Space.” Indeed, the peaceful atom had lost its glamour. Nuclear electricity could not be provided cheaply and there were no major achievements in using the atom to serve industry, agriculture, and medicine – although all these were vaunted in the early to mid-1950s. Ken McKenna, “Whatever Happened to Atomic Power?” *The Nation*, January 14, 1961, pp. 29-32.

<sup>56</sup> Dr. Edward Teller as told to Allen Brown, “How Nuclear Blasts Can Be Used For Peace,” *Reader’s Digest*, p. 54.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

Teller's use of biblical prophecy, in this case referring to a peaceful millennium, reinforced the image of the scientist as prophet in the atomic age. It was also an attempt by Teller to frame his prophecy in opposition to the majority of scientists whose apocalyptic warnings were dire and focused on the potential of a nuclear Armageddon.

There were examples in the early 1960s of ordinary Americans heeding the prophetic warnings of science and taking positive measures to avoid a future cataclysm. An interesting case of American citizens acting on their fears of nuclear war were identified in the press as groups of 'atomic refugees,' 'nuclear migrants,' or 'escapees.' These people, although their numbers represent a minute percentage of the American public, believed that the nation headed toward an inevitable, cataclysmic nuclear war. Flight was the only answer; the only solution was an exodus from the doomed nation. The mainstream media reported on nuclear migrants with a keen sense of curiosity and amazement. There was an evident temptation to discount the nuclear migrants as "crackpots," but, as one article reported, they found that "most of the emigrants, however, appear to be reasonable people. Among them could be found lawyers, scientists, doctors, architects, university professors, engineers, government officials. Most of them are people whom their neighbors think of, or used to think of, as successful participants in the American Way of Life."<sup>58</sup>

The *New York Times* reported on a group of twelve families from New York who had moved to Chico, California because they believed the west coast of the United States was less likely to face nuclear attack. It was with some amusement that the article reported that "near-by missile and Air Force installations made Chico, California, their

---

<sup>58</sup> Grant A. Flint, "Flight From Doomsday," *The Nation*, January 20, 1962, p. 55.

proposed new home, a prime bombing target.”<sup>59</sup> The leader of the group, Alvin Blauman, backpedaled, claiming, “it is true we took the danger of atomic fall-out into consideration, and we may have made a mistake on that score. But the real reason we are going is that we want to start a new life surrounded by friends who feel the way we do.”<sup>60</sup> The Chico group was perhaps under prepared and misinformed, but their desire to survive atomic attack was real. It was enough to motivate a move westward, and was informed by an apocalyptic idea that relied on a personal faith of survival in the face of doom.

The majority of nuclear migrants chose the southern hemisphere, especially New Zealand, as their refuge. New Zealand was a country well removed from the theatre of thermonuclear war in the northern hemisphere, and its idyllic setting attracted these refugees. The migrants who traveled to New Zealand, more organized than the Chico group, truly believed that nuclear war was imminent. Their actions demonstrate, at every stage of their flight, a perception conforming to apocalyptic norms. “Flight from Doomsday,” an article that chronicled their story, described the migrants’ jettisoning their old lives: “Most of these escapees will be gone before the spring rains come. They are selling their possessions, leaving behind friends, relatives, jobs, fleeing the sight of their neighbors’ bomb-shelter tombs.”<sup>61</sup> The migrants kept plans of their departure secret. Therefore, it was difficult to determine their numbers.<sup>62</sup> But the reason for their secrecy is interesting. The article described the reason as such: “Most of the groups are attempting to keep their activities secret. They believe exposure would bring outside interference,

---

<sup>59</sup> “Atom Refugees Lift Their Sights,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 1961, p. 77.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>61</sup> “Flight From Doomsday,” p. 53.

<sup>62</sup> An article appearing in the *New York Times* in 1964 cited New Zealand officials who said the number of Americans seeking permission for permanent residence had increased from 229 in 1960, to 330 in 1961, and 448 in 1962. J. Anthony Lukas, “U.S. Migrants Regard New Zealand as Nuclear-War Haven,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 1964, p. 4.

disrupting their plans and upsetting the delicate process of selecting members suitable for life in a survival colony.”<sup>63</sup> This secrecy dovetails to the apocalyptic tenet of exclusivity for the redeemed. The migrants had to select “suitable” members to compose their post-apocalyptic society. The groups departing for New Zealand planned their communities by looking to historical examples of American utopian experiments. Included in their considerations were the examples of Brook Farm, New Harmony, and the Oneida colony. “Flight from Doomsday” described the trait that linked all of these nuclear migrant groups:

Nearly all the survival colonies share another characteristic: each tends to view its venture as the nucleus of a new way of life, as a social experiment which might serve as a model for the external world – if the external world survives. And in the event that most of civilization is destroyed by thermonuclear war, the colonies picture themselves as tiny oases in a nuclear-ravaged wasteland, capable of preserving the better values of civilization and fostering the beginning of a new world.<sup>64</sup>

It would be difficult to provide a better example of the secular apocalyptic at work. Not only had nuclear migrants accepted the inevitability of nuclear Armageddon, they believed that by their escaping, they would thrive in a restored, reinvented, and perhaps perfected post-apocalyptic world. These migrants were not evangelical fundamentalists and they did not subscribe to the biblical apocalyptic. Their apocalyptic vision, although secular, conformed to an apocalyptic discourse that had existed in different – mainly biblical – forms throughout American history.

---

<sup>63</sup> “Flight From Doomsday,” p. 53.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

There were other examples of arguments in favour of exodus. James R. Newman, the editor of *Scientific American*, proposed in 1961 that Americans should transport their children to the Southern Hemisphere immediately, “before the holocaust.”<sup>65</sup> He believed that devastation by blast and fire, as well as fallout, would be confined to the belligerent northern hemisphere countries. The reason for transporting the children was the same as those provided by nuclear migrants; he argued that “Children ... suppose life to be an end in itself. And when they grow up they can breed and perpetuate the race.”<sup>66</sup> Clearly, opinions such as these displayed fatalism when considering the inevitability of war, but also hope that some redemption or regeneration was possible.

In addition to real-life examples of attempts to escape or survive the nuclear holocaust, salient examples from the then burgeoning field of nuclear literature captured the American media's and public's minds, quickly filling a vacuum in available nuclear imagery. Nothing captivated the apocalyptic imaginations more strongly than nuclear literature. In the 1950s and 1960s, there are numerous examples of fiction, some serious, some pulp, that utilized nuclear imagery. However, nuclear literature is an entire topic to itself. In this analysis, two novels (both adapted to film shortly after their publication), *On the Beach* (1957) and *Fail-Safe* (1962), are analyzed for their influence on the media. In both cases, commentators on nuclear issues turned to the examples of these two novels, not to review them, but to consider the possibility of similar scenarios occurring in reality. The distinct themes of both novels were incorporated in factual articles' discussions of what a real nuclear war might look like. The imagery was made more available in this period by their film adaptations – both wildly popular – *On the Beach*

---

<sup>65</sup> “Let Our Children Go,” *The Nation*, October 7, 1961, p. 219.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p. 219.

reached the silver screen in 1959, and *Fail-Safe* in 1964. It is both relevant and important to recognize the importance of novels like *On the Beach*, used as both signifier and symbol in real discussions on atomic issues. Not only does it demonstrate cultural resonance, but it also, to a certain extent, demonstrates the importance of these novels in imagining nuclear war. Without readily available cultural touchstones like Shute's apocalyptic novel, it would have been difficult for the media to articulate possible nuclear scenarios.

Nevil Shute's *On the Beach* was preceded by a verse from T.S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* (This is the way the world ends/Not with a bang but a whimper). This sets the tone for the novel, which chronicles the lives of Australians calmly waiting for the fallout that had already annihilated humanity in the northern hemisphere as it gradually drifts south. Shute's book alludes to the events that led to World War III – though he leaves that vague, describing it as “the Russo-Chinese war that had flared up out of the Israeli-Arab war, initiated by Albania. He [the American Submarine Commander in Shute's novel, Dwight Towers] learned of the use of cobalt bombs by both the Russians and the Chinese.”<sup>67</sup> Rather, he follows the lives of his characters as they attempt to go about business as usual in the twilight of their lives. A line from one of Shute's characters captures the dismal philosophy of this apocalyptic novel: “It's not the end of the world at all, it's the end of us. The world will go on just the same, only we shan't be in it. I dare say it will get along all right without us.”<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Nevil Shute, *On The Beach* (London: William Heinemann, 1957), p. 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 89.



The media debated and criticized Shute's stark warning, but also used *On the Beach* as a readily available image when explaining what the last war might look like.<sup>69</sup> Writers understood that Shute's message "convinces us that people are strong and good, that they have fortitude and tenacity – and that it is a dirty, shocking slur on man's intelligence to conceive of his allowing such a possibility to occur."<sup>70</sup> In responding to *On the Beach*, some commentators treated it as more of a treatise than a novel. John Fischer quoted an "informed scientist" to counter the *On the Beach* scenario:

Films like "On the Beach" have told us that a nuclear war would blot out all life on the planet, a good many people apparently have taken this rhetoric literally. I have not been able to find a single informed scientist who does. The most pessimistic – Dr. Linus Pauling – estimates that up to 75 percent of the people might die in a nuclear attack.<sup>71</sup>

*On the Beach*, a work of fiction, was drawn into the non-fiction arena of media speculation about nuclear war. Other writers assured their readers that world-death on the scale of *On the Beach* was not conceivable. In an editorial called "Let's Stop Talking Nonsense about Fallout," Stewart Alsop wrote, "It is theoretically possible that the human race will someday achieve the ability to end its existence forever, as in *On the Beach*. But that day is not here now nor is it likely to come in our lifetime."<sup>72</sup> The novel had become a widely known cultural symbol, or image, and the media used it as such.

---

<sup>69</sup> After *On the Beach* was released as a film in 1959, government officials were concerned enough to draw on AEC expertise to "counter the film's message." A message for U.S. information Agency missions recommended, "our attitude should be one of matter-of-fact interest, showing no special concern." Allan M. Winkler, *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), p. 105.

<sup>70</sup> Bosley Crowther, "End of the World? 'On the Beach' Views it on the Big Screen," *The New York Times*, December 20, 1959, p. X3.

<sup>71</sup> John Fischer, "The Editor's Easy Chair: Agenda for the Two Ks" *Harper's*, February 1961, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Stewart Alsop, "Let's Stop Talking Nonsense About Fallout," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 23, 1960, p. 10.

Apocalyptic prognostications on nuclear possibilities did not have many readily available images to colour their examples, but *On the Beach* served as one such available image.

*Fail-Safe* tied into the debate on the potential of a nuclear war by accident. The plot focused on U.S. radar picking up an unidentified flying object on their screens. Not sure if it is a Russian attack, they send their thermonuclear bomb-laden planes to their “fail-safe” points. The bombers go past their fail-safe points due to a mechanical failure and despite the fact that the radar warning was only a commercial airliner off course. The U.S. president tries to help the Kremlin find and shoot down their bombers. But, one gets through and is about to annihilate Moscow. To avoid war, the President and Khrushchev agree to sacrifice New York City, which the Americans have the privilege of doing themselves.<sup>73</sup>

Unlike Nevil Shute, the co-writers of *Fail-Safe*, Eugene Burdick and Harvey Wheeler, did not claim to have written only fiction. *Fail-Safe* was more than fiction, it was real. In the preface the authors argue:

Thus the element in our story which seems most fictional – the story’s central problem and its solution – is in fact the most real part. Men, machines, and mathematics being what they are, this is, unfortunately, a ‘true’ story. The accident may not occur in the way we describe but the laws of probability assure us that ultimately it will occur. The logic of politics tells us that when it does the only way out will be a choice of disasters.<sup>74</sup>

The two authors were comfortable in the role of apocalyptic prophets. Their attitude suggests that their ‘novel’ is more prophetic warning than fiction. Their preface did more

---

<sup>73</sup> The plot of *Fail-Safe* was startlingly similar to Peter George’s 1958 novel *Red Alert*, which was later used by Stanley Kubrick for his film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. George sued Burdick and Wheeler for plagiarism; they settled out of court.

<sup>74</sup> Eugene Burdick & Harvey Wheeler, *Fail-Safe* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), p. i.

to stoke the hysteria and sensationalism surrounding the novel than the plot of the novel itself. Reaction in the press included denunciations of the authors as fear mongers. One reviewer wrote, "A result of the 'Fail-Safe' hysteria could be to arouse among readers more fear of our defense system, as good as it is, than of Communism itself."<sup>75</sup> The critic's main concern was "for the effect such a novel-movie can have on both of our people and on other nations."<sup>76</sup> Although other writers castigated the novel as "intellectually scandalous" and "morally objectionable," claiming that it "exaggerates the risks involved in the defense of freedom," the novel was a literary extension of the already prevalent debate over thermonuclear war by accident.<sup>77</sup> After the initial furor over *Fail-Safe* had waned, the book became, like *On the Beach*, an accessible cultural symbol used to visualize the problematic possibility of nuclear war. For example, an article in *Reader's Digest* started its discussion of nuclear war-by-mistake this way: "Accidental nuclear war is a terrifying possibility. The President of the United States has spoken of its danger and a best-selling novel says that it's all but inevitable."<sup>78</sup>

The Cuban missile crisis was the event that changed the direction of nuclear apocalyptic discourse. For a few weeks in October of 1962, Americans held their breath as Kennedy and Khrushchev locked horns over the nuclear missiles the Soviets had installed in Cuba. For many, this was the culmination of fears about the bomb and the crisis made the possibility of nuclear Armageddon seem more imminent than ever. A contributor to the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* wrote an editorial, originally intended to honour the twentieth anniversary of the first controlled release of nuclear energy.

---

<sup>75</sup> Mark S. Watson, "Then, Where is the Real Danger?" *The New York Times*, October 6, 1963, p. 291.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 291.

<sup>77</sup> "Fact & Fiction," *Time*, January 18, 1963, p. 21.

<sup>78</sup> Donald Robinson, "How Safe if Fail Safe?" *Reader's Digest*, May 1963, p. 91.

However, he wrote it on October 24, in the midst of the crisis. He contemplated that the piece “may never be published.”<sup>79</sup> He captured the mood of the crisis when he wrote,

If inflexibility persists or if someone in the Soviet Union or Cuba or in our government makes the wrong decision, the great all-out nuclear war, which we have discussed and feared for twenty years, may be triggered. Never in history have people and nations been so close to death and destruction on such a vast scale. Midnight is upon us.<sup>80</sup>

However, thermonuclear war did not come. After the Cuban missile crisis, the mood changed substantially, and the event acted as a catharsis for the five years of building tension and apocalyptic discourse.<sup>81</sup>

The change was evident almost immediately. An editorial appearing in the *New York Times* a week after the crisis had passed recognized that “shaken but still in tact, the world escaped a nuclear Armageddon last weekend.”<sup>82</sup> *Time* reported that “Russia has given way,” and “Cuba must have convinced him [Khrushchev], if he still needed convincing, that the U.S. will stand firm in Berlin.”<sup>83</sup> Although some hailed it as an American triumph, the peaceful resolution of the Cuban missile crisis was less a victory than more evidence that neither power would risk nuclear war. This released tension and, as frightening as the brief confrontation was, immediately deflated the secular apocalyptic discourse begun in the late fifties. A year later, commentators looked back on

---

<sup>79</sup> “The Twentieth Year,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1962, p. 2.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>81</sup> James G. Blight, *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), p. 27; Weart, pp. 258-60.

<sup>82</sup> “The Days That Shook the World,” *The New York Times*, November 4, 1962, p. E8.

<sup>83</sup> “The Adventurer,” *Time*, November 9, 1962, p. 26.

the crisis as “an intriguing chapter on great accidents of our era.”<sup>84</sup> More succinctly, Stewart Alsop wrote:

Last year, and the year before that, and indeed right back to the Berlin blockade in 1948, the men in the government who must make the final decisions have proceeded on the assumption that there was a real danger of war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Now it is assumed that there is very little danger of such a war – in the immediate future, no danger at all.<sup>85</sup>

Both the media and the public took comfort in the prospect that the Cuban missile crisis’ peaceful resolution was proof that the specter of global nuclear war had receded.

After the Cuban crisis demonstrated that thermonuclear war between the two superpowers could be avoided, the Limited Nuclear Test Ban treaty of 1963 effectively closed the door on this period of apocalyptic discourse. *Time*, in 1963, observed, “The world situation is not what it was a little while ago.”<sup>86</sup> Looking at the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis and the nuclear test ban treaty, “the war that really could end war (along with everything else) seems fairly improbable.”<sup>87</sup> Although some writers cautioned that the nuclear test ban was “a Russian bear trap” that would “allow the Russian to catch up in nuclear weapons development,” the mood was less fatalistic and apocalyptic warnings in the media became scarce.<sup>88</sup> There were examples of temporal perceptions shifting yet again. An editorial in the *New York Times* wrote that the test ban treaty “can also be a symbol – if it can symbolize the end of one era and the beginning of

---

<sup>84</sup> Tad Szulc, “Cuban Confrontation – A Look One Year Later,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1963, p. 185.

<sup>85</sup> Stewart Alsop, “The Tiger will Bite,” *Saturday Evening Post*, October 19, 1963, p. 18.

<sup>86</sup> “Whose Myth? Whose Reality?” *Time*, April 3, 1964, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>88</sup> Craig Hosmer, “Beware the test ban!” *Saturday Evening Post*, September 7, 1963, p. 10.

another – if both sides by this treaty gain confidence and experience in peaceful collaboration, it will become an historic mark in man's age-old pursuit of peace.”<sup>89</sup> Because of the test ban, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* reported that subscriptions had dropped off substantially and that the journal faced “a serious financial crisis.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, there was a sense that the nation had avoided nuclear Armageddon. Almost a year after the test ban one self-described optimist concluded that “behind the pacification of the bomb's awfulness, the nations will struggle through footless little wars while seeking more fruitful processes of international evolution.”<sup>91</sup> Although the bomb did not go away, the eschatological exertions of the American media and public in the five years following Sputnik had exhausted the debate; the test ban was a welcome pivot to move away from apocalyptic narratives. Student movements and the American engagement in Vietnam would shift the media's focus away from prophecies and prognostications, to more tangible anxieties.

---

<sup>89</sup> “After Test Ban Treaty – Is it a First Step?” *The New York Times*, September 1, 1963, p. E10.

<sup>90</sup> Walter Sullivan, “Atom Magazine Too Successful,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 1964, p. 35.

<sup>91</sup> Alden B. Hoag, “A Dissent From Despair,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 1964, p. SM21.

**Conclusion:**

The threat of nuclear war in the late 1950s and early 1960s was real. The invention of thermonuclear weapons in 1953 meant that the American public had to conceive of bombs hundreds or thousands of times more powerful than those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The launch of Sputnik in late 1957 not only stirred fears of Soviet superiority in technology, but also introduced the notion of rockets powerful enough to deliver nuclear warheads directly from Russia to targets anywhere in the United States. The fear and uncertainty caused by these developments created space for the development of discursively apocalyptic narratives in American culture. In fact, these apocalyptic narratives developed because of this fear and uncertainty. Millenarian thinking had been a continuous part of American history from the time of the Puritan settlers, who had exported it from the old country. Therefore, there was an available apocalyptic framework in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which was used in an attempt to rationalize, explain, and understand the exigencies of the nuclear age. This was manifested in both traditionally biblical forms and a modern secular form, which conformed to apocalyptic archetypes – albeit non-divine. Notions of redemption in the face of nuclear holocaust were common in this secular narrative, which perhaps served to alleviate some of the tension of this fearful era. To the premillennial dispensationalists, their apocalyptic vision was almost utopian. They believed that the apocalypse would usher in a millennium where they would live in peace and harmony with their Lord – although there was no hope for the world before this divine intervention.

Both of these discourses persist in American culture to this day. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, premillennial prophecy writers regarded nuclear weapons as both a sign of the imminence of Christ's return and as a possible 'method' of God's apocalypse on earth. Since then, premillennials continue to incorporate contemporary events into their prophetic structure. The premillennial element of American fundamental Christianity has only grown stronger since the early sixties. The 1970s saw a heyday of premillennial prophecy writing, with books like Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* selling in the millions. In the 1980s up to today, figures like Tim LaHaye have been on the vanguard of millenarian evangelical writing, his *Left Behind* series also selling millions.<sup>1</sup> Nuclear war continues to figure in dispensationalist prophecies, but new developments have interested their gaze. The turn of the second millennium spawned pages upon pages of premillennial prophecies (which were to be expected). More recently, some dispensationalists have included the climate change crisis in their lists of reasons to be 'rapture ready.' Although the signs change, they still point to a number of inerrant proof texts – including the Book of Daniel, Revelations, and others – as the basis for their pseudo-scientific prophecies.

The secular apocalyptic that I identified in Chapter 1 and 2 has also re-emerged occasionally since 1963. Although there are a number of secular millenarian movements that have emerged, such as the Earth Changes movements and the Peak Oilers, these movements are too small and on the fringe to effect a broader American mainstream media discourse. However, the Y2K furor at the end of the twentieth century and the current climate change apocalypticism have both found space in mainstream discourse.

---

<sup>1</sup> For an excellent analysis of both Hal Lindsay and Tim LaHaye's influence on American evangelicalism, see: Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).



Apocalyptic frameworks continue to be relevant to those seeking to understand the potential calamities that confront humanity. As a pervasive discursive structure, apocalypse will not leave American culture any time soon. Though some argue the end will come sooner than others.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary Sources:**

Adams, John Kay. "The Reluctant Moles." *The Nation*, November 4, 1961, pp. 347-349.

"The Adventurer." *Time*, November 9, 1962, pp. 26-29.

"After Test Ban Treaty – Is it a First Step?" *The New York Times*, September 1, 1963, p. E10.

"Against the Silent Killer." *Time*, July 20, 1959, pp. 18-19.

Alderman, Paul R., Jr. "Space Flight?" *Moody Monthly*, May 1959, pp. 18-22.

Alsop, Stewart. "Let's Stop Talking Nonsense About Fallout." *Saturday Evening Post*, July 23, 1960, p. 10.

Alsop, Stewart. "The Tiger will Bite." *Saturday Evening Post*, October 19, 1963, p. 18.

"The Anatomy of Angst." *Time*, March 31, 1961, pp. 44-51.

"Apathy on Shelters." *The New York Times*, June 2, 1963, p. 158.

"Atom Refugees Lift Their Sights." *The New York Times*, September 17, 1961, p. 77.

Baldwin, Hanson W. "The Case Against Fallout Shelters." *Saturday Evening Post*, March 31, 1962, pp. 8-9.

Barclay, C.M., Brigadier (ret.). "A Very Real Risk – War By Accident." *The New York Times*, May 5, 1963, p. 229.

"Bertrand Russell on The Sinful Americans: A Somewhat Frustrating Exchange of Letters." *Harper's*, June 1963, pp. 21-28.

"Boom to Bust." *Time*, May 18, 1962, p. 20.

Bracker, Milton. "Atomic War Held Threat To Nature: Only Insects and Bacteria Will Survive, Scientist Says." *The New York Times*, June 17, 1962, p. 46.

Brown, Harrison & James Real. *Community of Fear*. Santa Barbara: Center for The Study of Democratic Institutions, 1960.

Burdick, Eugene & Harvey Wheeler. *Fail-Safe*. London: Hutchinson, 1962.

"Chances of a War in 60s Reported: A Study Explores Likelihood of Unintentional Conflict and Nuclear Accident." *The New York Times*, July 4, 1960, p. 28.

"The Christian and The Powers That Be." *Moody Monthly*, July 1961, pp. 14-15.

"Coffins or Shields?" *Time*, February 2, 1962, p. 15.

"The Countdown." *The Sunday School Times*, October 8, 1960, p. 771.

Crowther, Bosley. "End of the World? 'On the Beach' Views it on the Big Screen." *The New York Times*, December 20, 1959, p. X3.

"The Days That Shook the World." *The New York Times*, November 4, 1962, p. E8.

DeHaan, M.R. *Coming Events in Prophecy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1962.

"Disaster Warning." *Moody Monthly*, December 1963, p. 14.

Dugan, George. "'3<sup>rd</sup> Force Rises For Protestants." *The New York Times*, May 20, 1962, p. 66.

"Editorial." *Moody Monthly*, September 1962, p. 70.

"Exploded Myth." *Time*, July 20, 1962, p. 22.

"Facing Up to Fallout." *Time*, February 29, 1960, p. 18.

"Fact & Fiction." *Time*, January 18, 1963, p. 21.

Finney, John W. "Scientists Revise View On Fall-Out: Immediate Danger Put Too Low." *The New York Times*, June 24, 1959, p. 6.

Fischer, John. "The Editor's Easy Chair: Agenda for the Two Ks." *Harper's*, February 1961, pp. 15-26.

Fischer, John. "Sixty Ivory Towers Forty Feet Underground." *Harper's*, May 1962, pp. 15-16.

Flint, Grant A. "Flight From Doomsday." *The Nation*, January 20, 1962, pp. 53-55.

Frank, Pat. "Are We Safe From Our Own Bombs?" *Saturday Evening Post*, July 23, 1960, p. 50.

"The Future of Russia." *Moody Monthly*, October 1963, p. 31.

"Getting Ready for Armageddon." *Saturday Evening Post*, March 3, 1962, pp. 76-77.

"Graham Deplores Crisis at Summit." *The New York Times*, May 18, 1960, p. 18.

"Gun Thy Neighbor?" *Time*, August 18, 1961, p. 58.

Hagan, Roger. "Shelters: When The Holocaust Comes." *The Nation*, November 4, 1961, pp. 341-347.

Hailey, Foster. "200 Professors Say Shelters Invite War." *The New York Times*, November 10, 1961, p. 1.

Harrison, William K. "A Christian's General View: Is Nuclear War Justifiable?" *Christianity Today*, June 21, 1963, pp. 3-5.

Harrison, Lieut. General William K., Jr. (ret.). "Why I believe the Lord's Return Is Near." *The Sunday School Times*, January 9, 1960, pp. 25-26.

Havner, Vance. "Counterfeit Millennium." *Moody Monthly*, March 1963, pp. 79-81.

Hoag, Alden B. "A Dissent From Despair." *The New York Times*, April 5, 1964, p. SM21.

Hosmer, Craig. "Beware the test ban!" *Saturday Evening Post*, September 7, 1963, pp. 10-14.

Hunt, Richard P. "One Town's 'Great Debate' Over Shelters." *The New York Times*, February 4, 1962, p. 9.

Kac, Arthur W. "Prophetic Patterns In the World Today." *Moody Monthly*, May 1960, pp. 26-30.

Koestler, Arthur. "Reflection on the Year 15 P.H." *The New York Times*, March 20, 1960, p. SM29.

Kahn, Herman. "How Many Can Be Saved?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, January 1959, pp. 30-34.

Kahn, Herman. *On Thermonuclear War*. London: Oxford University Press, 1960.

Kahn, Herman. "We're Too Scared to Think." *Saturday Evening Post*, September 16, 1961, pp. 12-14.

Kirstein, George G. "Non-Survivability Plus." *The Nation*, March 5, 1960, p. 203.

Krock, Arthur. "Problem No. 2." *The New York Times*, May 6, 1962, p. 217.

Lakin, R.D. "Nuclear Nirvana." *The Nation*, September 29, 1962, pp. 179-181.

"Is it Later Than We Think?" *Moody Monthly*, November 1961, p. 9.

Leonard, Jonathan N. "For Survivors, Life Won't Be Worth Living." *The New York Times*, April 24, 1960, p. BR 20.

"Let Our Children Go." *The Nation*, October 7, 1961, p. 219.

"Letters: Better Ready Than Dead." *Time*, October 27, 1961, p. 5.

"Letters: Civil Defense 'Disgrace.'" *Saturday Evening Post*, August 15, 1959, pp. 4-6.

"Letters: Comments on Shelters." *The New York Times*, October 12, 1961, p. 28.

"Letters: Fallout Shelters Debated." *Saturday Evening Post*, April 5, 1962, p. 4.

"Letters to the Times: Shelter Program Opposed." *The New York Times*, March 20, 1960, p. E10.

Lippincott, H.H. "Nuclear Threat and Soviet Russia." *Christianity Today*, October 27, 1958, pp. 13-15.

Lort-Phillips, Patrick. "The Useless Weapon." *The Nation*, August 15, 1959, pp. 71-73.

Lukas, J. Anthony. "U.S. Migrants Regard New Zealand as Nuclear-War Haven." *The New York Times*, January 28, 1964, p. 4.

Martin, Harold H. "A Vivid Portrait of the Famous Revivalist Billy Graham." *Saturday Evening Post*, April 13, 1963, p. 18.

McKenna, Ken. "Whatever Happened to Atomic Power?" *The Nation*, January 14, 1961, pp. 29-32.

Mead, Margaret. "Are Shelters the Answer?" *The New York Times*, November 26, 1961, p. SM29.

Michael, Donald N. "Psychopathology of Nuclear War." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May 1962, p. 28.

Morgenthau, Hans J. "Living With 'the Bomb.'" *The New York Times*, April 15, 1962, p. BR22.

"A New Urgency." *Life*, September 15, 1961, p. 98.

Ogburn, Charlton Jr. "America the Expendable." *Harper's*, August 1960, pp. 56-64.

"On Limited Warfare." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 1959, p. 343.

O'Neil, Paul. "U.S. Change of Mind." *Life*, March 3, 1958, p. 91.

"One in Five Get Ready." *Time*, August 25, 1961, p. 15.

Overman, Ralph T. "Will Science Destroy the World?" *Christianity Today*, May 25, 1959, pp. 3-5.

Philips, T. Roland. "Loving His Appearing." *Moody Monthly*, October 1958, pp. 24-25.

Porter, Charles O. "Accident or Aggression?" *The Nation*, March 5, 1960, pp. 202-205.

Price, Oliver W. "Can America Be Neutral Toward God?" *The Sunday School Times*, July 4, 1959, pp. 509-510.

"Professors Doubt Value of Shelters." *The New York Times*, November 10, 1961, p. 12.

Rabinowitch, Eugene. "After Missiles and Satellites, What?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1957, p. 346.

Rabinowitch, Eugene. "Man Must Prevail." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1962, p. 4.

"The Race in Space." *Moody Monthly*, May 1959, p. 13.

"Radiological Defense." 1961, *The Prelinger Archives*,  
<http://www.archive.org/details/Radiolog1961>.

Reston, James. "How to Be Evaporated in Style." *The New York Times*, October 15, 1961, p. E8.

Reston, James. "Those Sweet and Kindly Shelter Builders." *The New York Times*, November 12, 1961, p. E8.

"Revival or Ruin." *The Sunday School Times*, May 7, 1960, p. 356.

"Revival of Survival." *Time*, September 27, 1963, p. 21.

Robinson, Donald. "How Safe if Fail Safe?" *Reader's Digest*, May 1963, pp. 91-94.

"Rundown of Things." *Life*, September 15, 1961, p. 108.

"rx for Doomsday." *Time*, November 24, 1961, p. 63.

"Salesmen Fete Graham." *The New York Times*, March 1, 1958, p. 13.

Shapley, Harlow. "Moonstruck U.S.A.: Satellite Hysteria." *The Nation*, October 26, 1957, p. 276.

"'Shelter' is a Nice Word." *The Nation*, September 12, 1959, p. 122.

"Shelter Skelter." *Time*, September 1, 1961, pp. 59-60.

"The Sheltered Life." *Time*, October 20, 1961, pp. 21-25.

Shute, Nevil. *On The Beach*. London: William Heinemann, 1957.

Smith, Huston. "Living With Apocalypse: Twenty Years of the Atom." *The Nation*, December 15, 1962, pp. 421-423.

Smith, Wilbur M. "Our Agnostic World and Its One Hope." *Moody Monthly*, April 1963, pp. 36-40.

"Space, History and God." *Life*, April 7, 1958, p. 37.

Stob, Henry. "An Ethic's Professor's View." *Christianity Today* June 21, 1963, pp. 5-7.

"Strategy of Terror." *The New York Times*, October 19, 1961, p. 34.

Sullivan, Walter. "Atom Magazine Too Successful." *The New York Times*, March 29, 1964, p. 35.

"Survival of the Fewest." *Saturday Evening Post*, March 23, 1963, pp. 17-21.

Tad Szulc. "Cuban Confrontation – A Look One Year Later." *The New York Times*, October 20, 1963, p. 185.

Teller, Dr. Edward, as told to Allen Brown. "How Nuclear Blasts Can Be Used For Peace." *Reader's Digest*, pp. 52-54.

"To Survive Nuclear Attack: Shelter Plan Outlined in Report to Governor Rockefeller Backed." *The New York Times*, March 13, 1960, p. E8.

"The Third Force In Christendom." *Life*, June 9, 1958, pp. 113-119.

Trussell, C.P. "Toll of 50 Million Pictured In an Atom Attack on U.S." *The New York Times*, August 31, 1959, p. 1.

"The Twentieth Year." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1962, vol. xviii, no. 10, pp. 2-3.

"U.S. Test Director." *Time*, April 20, 1962, p. 28.

"The Waning Nuclear Deterrent." *Time*, January 2, 1961, p. 16.

Watson, Mark S. "Then, Where is the Real Danger?" *The New York Times*, October 6, 1963, p. 291.

"We Are Losing America." *Moody Monthly*, July 1961, p. 1.

Whose Myth? Whose Reality?" *Time*, April 3, 1964, pp. 23-24.

Wicklein, John. "Major Attacks Church Council." *The New York Times*, March 21, 1960, p. 5.

"As We Near End Times." *Moody Monthly*, June 1961, p. 10.

"Will Your Church Be Ready?" *Moody Monthly*, February 1959, p. 13.

"Is Your Church Ready if Bombs Should Fall?" *Moody Monthly*, February 1959, pp. 15-17.

### Secondary Sources:

Amanat, Abbas & Magnus Bernhardsson (eds). *Imagining the End: Visions of Apocalypse from the Ancient Middle East to Modern America*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Berger, James. "Ends and Means: Theorizing Apocalypse in the 1990's." *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 6, No. 3, (May 1996),

Bercovich, Sacvan. *The American Jeremiad*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1978.

Blight, James G. *The Shattered Crystal Ball: Fear and Learning in the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.

Boyer, Paul. *By the Bombs Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.



- Boyer, Paul. *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Chilton, Paul. *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate: Nukespeak Today*. London: F. Pinter, 1985.
- Cohn, Norman. *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- DeGroot, Gerard J. *The Bomb: A Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Dewey, Joseph. *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1990.
- Divine, Robert. *Blowing on the Wind: the Nuclear Test Ban Debate, 1954-1960*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- George, Alice L. *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
- Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. New York: Bantam, 1987.
- Hales, Peter B. "The Atomic Sublime." *American Studies*, 31 (2) (1991), pp. 5-30.
- Heard, Alex. *Apocalypse Pretty Soon: Travels in End-Time America*. New York: Doubleday, 1999.
- Hine, Thomas. *Populuxe*. New York: MJF, 1999.
- Hofstadter, Richard. *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966.
- Isserman, Maurice & Michael Kazin. *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Kintz, Linda & Julie Lesage (eds.) *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Landes, Richard. "The Fruitful Error: Reconsidering Millennial Enthusiasm." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32: 1 (Summer, 2001), pp. 89-98.
- Malcolmson, Robert W. *Nuclear Fallacies: How We Have Been Misguided Since Hiroshima*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985.
- Marsden, George M. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991.

Marty, Martin E. & Scott Appleby. *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*. Boston: Beacon, 1992.

May, Elaine Tyler. "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb." In May, Lary (ed.) *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

McGinn, Bernard. *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.

Noll, Mark A. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

O'Leary, Stephen D. *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Rose, Kenneth D. *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2001.

Shuck, Glenn W. *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity*. New York: New York University Press, 2005.

Sherry, Michael S. *In the Shadow of War: The United States since the 1930s*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Smith, Jeff. *Unthinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and American Culture*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.

Thatcher, Tom. "Empty Metaphors and Apocalyptic Rhetoric." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 66, no. 3. (Autumn, 1998), pp. 549-570.

Thompson, Damian. *The End of Time: Faith and Fear in the Shadow of the Millennium*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997.

Wang, Jessica. "Scientists and the Problem of the Public in Cold War America, 1945-1960." *Osiris*, vol. 17 (2002), pp. 323-47.

Watson, Bruce. "We Couldn't Run, So We Hoped We Could Hide." *Smithsonian* (April 1994), pp. 47-57.

Weart, Spencer R. *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Weber, Eugen. *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults, and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Weber, Timothy P. *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1982*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983.

Winkler, Allan M. *Life Under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999.

Wojcik, Daniel. *The End of the World As We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Wuthnow, Robert. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.