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Doom Town, Nevada Test Site, and the Popular Imagination of Atomic Disaster

JOHN WILLS

This article explores the effect of Doom Town, a civil defense experiment conducted at Nevada Test Site in March 1953 and May 1955, on American attitudes toward the atom. Initially conceived by the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) as a means to progress knowledge and understanding of how to survive nuclear attack, the creation and destruction of two “Survival Towns” in the Nevada desert instead accelerated national anxieties. My article looks at how local and national media negatively framed the two experiments, and how the public responded, with two specific images of Doom Town undermining public confidence in the atom: the ruined city (or hometown Hiroshima) and the projected death of the American nuclear family.

Americans lived in fear of nuclear attack in the 1950s. Escalations in the new Cold War threatened to destroy the security, peace, and prosperity promised by victory in World War II. Soviet testing of nuclear weaponry raised the specter of a third global conflict, and the US military responded with extensive nuclear testing both in the Pacific and at home in the American West. At Nevada Proving Ground (later renamed Nevada Test Site), the US military, assisted by the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), embarked on an extensive series of above-ground nuclear explosions and battlefield maneuvers across the decade. Meanwhile, the newly established Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) pondered how to effectively compel the American public to prepare for the possibility of a decisive nuclear strike on domestic soil. The FCDA produced a range of leaflets and documentaries, as well as drills and live events (including the two Doom Towns discussed here), to coerce Americans into civil defense duties.

To some degree, the contrasting activities of the AEC and the FCDA set the tone for atomic culture in the 1950s, one group keen to promote atomic weaponry and technological development, the other encouraging home-front civil

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defense through such schemes as Duck and Cover drills in school. The largely separate activities of bomb testing and civil defense practice came together very publicly on 17 March 1953 and 5 May 1955, when the FCDA organized televised civil defense activities at Nevada Test Site to coincide with two atomic detonations, Annie and Apple 2. Codenamed Operation Doorstep (1953) and Operation Cue (1955), the FCDA constructed fake towns (nicknamed Doom Town I and II) at Yucca Flats, and stocked them with all manner of furniture, food, and even mannequin residents, to see how well the American home survived nuclear attack. It is these Doom Towns, and how the media and public responded to them, that concern this article.

Atomic culture in the 1950s has a rich and established scholarship.¹ While broad studies of civil defense all reference Doom Town, dedicated coverage remains limited.² However, Doom Towns I and II signified major civil defense events that coincided with a national shift from (at the very least) lukewarm support over atomic developments to growing unease over atmospheric testing and nuclear survival. I argue that the two FCDA events actively contributed to, and symbolically marked, a nationwide shift in mood owing to a combination of media and public responses. Thanks to extensive television

¹ See, for example, Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Richard Miller, *Under the Cloud: The Decades of Nuclear Testing* (Woodlands, TX: Two-Sixty Press, 1986); A. Costandina Titus, *Bombs in the Backyard: Atomic Testing and American Politics* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001); and Spencer Weart, *Nuclear Fear: A History of Images* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). On the British side see Jonathan Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture: Official and Unofficial Narratives in the Long 20th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). New work on atomic culture includes Robert Jacobs, *Nuclear Bodies: The Global Hibakusha* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022); and Sarah E. Robey, *Atomic Americans: Citizens in a Nuclear State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022).

² Doom Town is briefly mentioned as an example of FCDA activity and NTS history in Andrew Kirk, "Rereading the Nature of Atomic Doom Towns," *Environmental History*, 17, 3 (July 2012), 637–39; Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 54–5; Joseph Masco, "Survival Is Your Business: Engineering Ruins and Affect in Nuclear America," *Cultural Anthropology*, 23, 2 (May 2008), 373–78; Tom Vanderbilt, *Survival City: Adventures among the Ruins of Atomic America* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002), 89–93; and Robert A. Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 18–20. It also serves as a focus for chapter 5 of Kirk's graphic/comic book history of Nevada Test Site, Andrew Kirk, *Doom Towns: The People and Landscapes of Atomic Testing. A Graphic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). For a dedicated piece on the consumer attributes of Doom Town see John Wills, "Exploding the 1950s Consumer Dream: Mannequins and Mushroom Clouds at Doom Town, Nevada Test Site," *Pacific Historical Review*, 88, 3 (Summer 2019), 410–38. Also useful is Angela Moor, "Selling Civil Defense: The Politics and Commerce of Preparedness, 1950–1963," MA thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (August 2008).

and press coverage, the transformation of two mannequin-inhabited towns into radioactive rubble provided some of the most powerful and evocative images of destruction in the Cold War, and their significance, as integers of nuclear anxiety and horror, has been overlooked. Likewise, the public consumption and appropriation of such images has yet to be explored.

This article employs a range of FCDA reports, press stories, personal letters, and historical documents to explore the cultural significance of Doom Town I and II, specifically how the projects, conceived as objects of optimism designed to put civil defense on a positive track, instead emerged as potent homegrown imaginaries of death, decay, and nuclear nihilism. It first looks at the FCDA's hopes for Operation Doorstep and Operation Cue and early attempts to present the two events in a positive light and rally civil defense campaigns. It then moves on to explore the dominant visual and literary framing of the events by the press and the public, highlighting how journalists, by contrast, largely cast the experiments as shocking and macabre, and how the public, observing the tests either from the fringes of the test site, nearby Las Vegas, or on television, responded to Doom Town with a mixture of fear and concern, especially over the fate of their own homes. Rather than service practical information on how to survive nuclear war, the two towns emerged as potent visual indicators of what horrors might ensue if conflict happened. Placed alongside reports of dead animals near Nevada Test Site, growing worries over radiation and ill health, and rising skepticism toward atmospheric testing, stories of Doom Town propelled national anxieties forward, and as Joseph Masco has intimated, helped "nationalize nuclear fear."³ This process owed much to the role of popular media, as well as Americans themselves translating and appropriating FCDA events, as we shall see here. In particular, the FCDA put nuclear fear on the "doorstep" of everyday America with its Doom Town projects, and the American press and public actively responded. Doom Town came to symbolize two distinct things in the cultural imaginary: the unwelcome prospect of an American Hiroshima, and the (slow) death of the American nuclear family.

HOPES FOR "SURVIVAL TOWN"

The FCDA's "emotional management" of American citizens in the 1950s is well understood.⁴ For Masco, the FCDA's comprehensive and sometimes

³ See Barton Hacker, "'Hotter Than a \$2 Pistol?' Fallout, Sheep, and the Atomic Energy Commission, 1953–1986," in Bruce Hevly and John M. Findlay, eds., *The Atomic West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 157–78; on growing worries see Weart, 199–214; Masco, 376.

⁴ Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 47. See also Guy Oakes and Andrew Grossman, "Managing

contradictory “propaganda campaign” challenged both outright fear and dull apathy regarding the bomb (while, for Laura McEnaney, the FCDA resembled “an ad agency whose client was the bomb”).⁵ A range of documentaries, exhibits, pamphlets and drills aimed to foster a nation of concerned, dutiful citizens wholeheartedly committed to civil defense activities. Tactics varied from alarmist statements in defense material, such as “a single rumor might touch off a panic that could cost your life,” through to warm reassurances of “don’t get discouraged” and promotions of radioactivity itself as a natural and harmless property and of “fallout as nothing more than particles of matter in the air.”⁶

Conceived as positive beacons for the civil defense movement, the open tests at Nevada Test Site in 1953 and 1955 were designed to highlight the survivability of nuclear attack. By visually documenting ways to tackle a nuclear explosion, it was hoped that Operation Doorstep and Operation Cue could impart the core message of the agency: preparedness leads to survival, and survival leads to ultimate victory over the Soviet aggressor. The FCDA’s *Annual Report* of 1953 situated Doorstep as part of “both individual and family pre-attack indoctrination and training ... designed to allay fear, combat rumor, and restore confidence and the will to win.”⁷ Doom Town’s original name, “Survival Town,” underlined this broad sense of optimism and determination to succeed. The term “indoctrination,” meanwhile, revealed official attitudes towards the pliability of the American public.

The FCDA presented both tests as firmly in the national interest due to their potential to enhance the nation’s civil defense programs by scientific investigation (as Sarah Robey calls it, “gathering nuclear knowledge”), and unlock “the secrets of survival” before a live audience.⁸ In one of the first planning notes for Doorstep, the NTS Public Information Office stressed the need for the AEC and the US military “to comply with the FCDA’s request for an ‘open test’ to increase national interest in the civil defense program by showing examples of damage, radiation monitoring.”⁹ For the FCDA, Doorstep and Cue

Nuclear Terror: The Genesis of American Civil Defense Strategy,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 5, 3 (Spring 1992), 361–403. Jonathan Hogg, *British Nuclear Culture*, 82, similarly uses “emotional management” to describe efforts in 1950s Britain to “persuade and cajole British people into positive ways of thinking and acting in response to future nuclear threats.”⁵ Masco, 367; McEnaney, 30.

⁶ Civil Defense Office/National Security Resources Board, *Survival under Atomic Attack* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1951), 17; FCDA, *Facts about Fallout* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1955), 2, 7.

⁷ FCDA, *Annual Report* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1953), 67.

⁸ Robey, 45; *Survival under Atomic Attack*, 3.

⁹ R. L. Southwick, NTS Public Information Office, memo to H. Bugher et al., 12 Feb. 1953, NV0404682. All NV documents are held at the Nuclear Testing Archive, Las Vegas, Nevada.

signified valuable exercises in information gathering, but more than that, the “open tests” welcomed the public into previously closed spaces, and highlighted that civil defense was important work and “everybody’s business.”¹⁰

The administration planned to test a range of everyday items, from venetian blinds to automobiles, in terms of their ability to endure nuclear attack. Conceived much like a science exhibit at a World’s Fair (or like Westinghouse’s Total Electric Home of 1959), the administration promoted the Survival Towns for their “demonstration value.”¹¹ FCDA director Val Peterson described how, for him, Operation Cue was in fact “Operation Q,” a project designed to answer fundamental questions about civil defense.¹² To a large degree, Peterson proved correct in his assertions. Information from Doom Town fed into all manner of defense planning. Just weeks after Cue, the FCDA’s “4 Wheels to Survival” campaign referenced the Nevada tests when promoting the American automobile as an all-new multipurpose survival tool, capable of facilitating fast evacuation, providing valuable shelter, serving as an “information center,” and carrying emergency supplies. The accompanying booklet asserted, “Tests under atomic explosion in Nevada proved that modern cars ... give a degree of protection.”¹³ References to open, scientific investigation at Doom Town presented the FCDA as a neutral, trustworthy, and authoritative guide.

The FCDA equally conceived Doorstep and Cue as “corrective measures” designed to realign public opinion, revealing an overstated confidence in the ability of government to mould popular attitudes. The two tests promised to “set the record straight” concerning the new atomic age and its dangers. Members of the FCDA worried over the power of “misinformation” to hamper their cause, and particularly feared the loss of public support. The FCDA pamphlet *Survival under Atomic Attack* critiqued unofficial “stories” circulating about atomic weapons in the early 1950s, with radioactivity mistakenly viewed by the public as “mysterious” when “we actually know more about radioactivity and what it does to people than we know about infantile paralysis, colds or some other common diseases.” The same pamphlet stressed the need to “KILL THE MYTHS” surrounding the new atomic era.¹⁴ The idea of “correcting” public understanding proved popular in official circles. One agency memorandum detailed the urgent need to “demonstrate the

¹⁰ *Survival under Atomic Attack*, 31.

¹¹ Richard Hirsch to Mr. E. B. Staats, “FCDA Proposal,” US government memo, 4 Jan. 1954, NV0311484.

¹² Val Peterson’s Welcome, FCDA, *Operation Cue Observer Handbook* (1955), NV0032284.

¹³ FCDA, *4 Wheels to Survival* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1955). The booklet also suggested, “Your car can be your shopping center.”

¹⁴ *Survival under Atomic Attack*, 4, 15.

effects of the nuclear detonation, with emphasis on those effects about which the public has the least information, or about which gross misconceptions exist.”¹⁵ The agency volunteered Doom Town as an antidote to existing “defeatism” and “confusion” as if tackling mass-induced illnesses.¹⁶ In the lead-up to both tests, civil defense experts hosted Q & A sessions for observers, and talks to the press on matters such as “Instrumentation and Diagnosis of Atomic Bursts” and the “Effects of Blasts on Structures,” all designed to reassert the official narrative and reshape popular opinion.¹⁷

The “corrective” measures extended to a realignment of popular language. Peterson urged a shift in tone away from alarming (and for him, inaccurate) terminology, explaining how, at Nevada Test Site, “The use of the term ‘device’ is deliberate and accurate. Many times, the objective of detonation is to develop principles or to check calculations. It would be misleading to call such laboratory devices ‘bombs.’”¹⁸ Instead, the agency committed to more positive phrasing. The word “survival” appeared with increasing regularity in 1950’s civil defense material. *Survival under Atomic Attack* stressed, “You Can SURVIVE. You can live through an atom bomb raid and you won’t have to have a Geiger Counter, protective clothing, or special training in order to do it,” while, by 1955, the FCDA had committed to comprehensive, nationwide “Survival Planning” and “Survival Studies.”¹⁹ The agency hoped that the two Survival Towns would themselves underline the rhetorical shift.²⁰ The tests could help reframe popular understanding about the nuclear age and build greater confidence in civil defense matters.

The FCDA also hoped that the two Survival Towns would lead to more enthusiastic engagement with its programs. Throughout the 1950s, the administration struggled to recruit volunteers, and consecutive directors longed for a sea change in public attitude. Peterson expressed his personal hope that Survival Town could bring new life to civil defense, writing, “This test program can be our ‘Cue’ for such a renewed effort.”²¹

With the widest audience in mind, Survival Towns focussed on bringing “ordinary Americans” into the civil defense fold. Largely based on the

¹⁵ Hirsch to Staats, “FCDA Proposal.”

¹⁶ FCDA, *Annual Report* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1955), 72.

¹⁷ FCDA, Revised Open Shot Schedule, 15 April 1955, Nevada State Museum (NSM), Clark County Civil Defense Records (MS28), Box 2, Folder 14.

¹⁸ Welcome, *Operation Cue Observer Handbook*.

¹⁹ *Survival under Atomic Attack*, 2; FCDA, *Annual Report* (Washington, DC: US Govt. Printing Office, 1955), 1–2, 21. Also see 4 *Wheels to Survival*.

²⁰ For example, the FCDA cited Operation Doorstep as providing “visual proof that a family can survive.” *Annual Report* (1953), 70.

²¹ Peterson, *Operation Cue Observer Handbook*. Also see Val Peterson, Operation Cue Briefing Session, 22 April 1955, NV0143670.

assumption that by seeing homes destroyed, Americans would feel duty-bound to act, official material stressed the everyday mannequins residing in “typical American frame homes,” the implication being that all Americans, whatever their background, needed to prepare for danger.²² This approach proved at least partially consistent with prior FCDA endeavours, for example, former director Millard Caldwell stressed how “the men and women on the street and in the factory will be the prime target” of any new war and needed to act.²³ Similarly, a 1951 article in *Look* magazine, entitled “We’re Wide Open for Disaster,” conveyed a desperate compulsion to “save John Doe and his family” from atomic carnage, with a dead man under rubble as its startling front cover, and graphic images of a decimated Pittsburgh inside (the piece was duly reprinted and distributed by the FCDA).²⁴ In the new Cold War, everybody appeared in jeopardy. However, the FCDA gave little thought to how Americans as individuals might respond in their own ways when faced with danger.

The FCDA targeted the *whole* American family in its call to action, albeit with class and racial overtones. The white mannequin “nuclear families” assembled in middle-class homes at Doorstep and Cue symbolized for the FCDA a movement that targeted one and all, but in actual imagery excluded black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American audiences. Images of white middle-class male figures drawing on their DIY skills to construct makeshift bomb shelters in their basements underlined 1950s ideals of masculinity and leadership, establishing early ideas of what Thomas Bishop terms “nuclear fatherhood.”²⁵ Photographs of white female mannequins posing by well-organized tinned goods advertised both a new FCDA food-stocking campaign and traditional ideas about domestic goddesses. Freeman Company, a Beverly Hills public-relations firm consulting for the FCDA, offered suggestions for how Survival Town might include children, and actively boost Operation Identification (Operation Tot-Tag), a scheme designed to identify kids in case of injury or death by the wearing of stainless-steel ID tags. Freeman suggested “selection of 10 youngsters to watch the Open Shot” at Operation Cue, where they could promote the use of dog tags. “The first American youngsters to see the A-bomb personally, and wearing their Tags, would make for great pictures,” the PR company advised, enthusing, “reactions after the Test would dramatically bring home to every youngster in America what the

²² FCDA, “Houses to Be Exposed to Atomic Bomb Blast,” press release, 5 March 1953, NSM, Patricia Lee Papers (MS36), Box 1, Folder 2. ²³ FCDA, *Annual Report* (1951), v.

²⁴ Fletcher Knebel, “We’re Wide Open for Disaster,” *Look*, 15, 2 (27 Feb. 1951), FCDA reprint archived at NSM, MS28, Box 1, Folder 27.

²⁵ Thomas Bishop, *Every Home a Fortress: Cold War Fatherhood and the Family Fallout Shelter* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 4.

A-bomb means in their lives,” and “make for interesting layout for a magazine.” Freeman pushed for tags to be duly shipped to 15,000 schoolkids in Las Vegas, with the region cast as a “test case” for civil defense ideas and public receptivity.²⁶

RESPONDING TO DOOM TOWN

The response of news media and the American public to Doorstep, Cue, and their related civil defense schemes nonetheless varied significantly in tone, from outbursts of enthusiastic support for the FCDA to outright skepticism over any claim of “survivability” when faced with nuclear attack. The two Doom Towns revealed a public increasingly split on the atom, and actively choosing sides based on a range of factors, rather than simply accepting civil defense material at face value.

Predictably given their technical backgrounds, science journalists covering Nevada Test Site largely embraced the experimental nature of the towns. Journalists reported the detonation of Apple 2 as “expected to unlock further secrets of civil defense and point the way to survival in the atomic age,” and articles paraphrased official press releases, highlighting a loyalty to government material.²⁷ In the aftermath of the tests, reporters extracted positive stories from the radioactive debris, for example writing articles on how quickly and enthusiastically civil defense officers sprang into action, or sometimes turning Doom Town into (as much as possible) a lighthearted feel-good story, as when local reporter Elton Fay rejoiced when “out of a makeshift bathroom shelter came two cheerful, tail-wagging witnesses for survival” at Operation Cue (carefully omitting how the canine survivors headed next to laboratory testing).²⁸

Survival Town also proved a positive, even optimistic, experience for a range of human attendees, especially those already involved in the civil defense movement. For Jean Fuller, head of women’s activities in the FCDA, Operation Cue was “terrific, interesting and exciting.”²⁹ “Seeing the bomb” provided a

²⁶ Freeman Company Public Relations, “Operation Tot-Tag” (undated, 1955), NSM, MS28, Box 2, Folder 10. Conscious that the publicity stunt might prove controversial, Freeman then stressed the need for absolute secrecy in its planning “to crush any advance or premature criticism,” and that “once we start our timetable, and it moves on time, the criticism that is natural to break out will be smothered by the fast-moving events of the distribution of tags, the witnessing of the A-test by children, and the announcement of the national contest.”

²⁷ Archie Teague, “Doom Town to Show Way to Survival,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 24 April 1955.

²⁸ Elton C. Fay, “‘Death’ and Destruction in Atom-Blasted Town,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 6 May 1955.

²⁹ “A-Blast Exciting,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 May 1955.

valuable opportunity to hone survival skills and nurture fellowship. During the prior 1952 test series in Nevada, local civil defense director I. R. "Cy" Crandall bussed school principals, hotel managers, firemen, police officers, and scouts out of town to watch atomic tests from a safe distance at Mount Charleston. Miss Clara Hogg, executive secretary of the American Red Cross at Las Vegas, personally thanked Crandall for such an opportunity, enthusing, "The coffee and doughnuts which were served at Mount Charleston look-out point by your dept. really made a big hit."³⁰ Doorstep and Cue invited civil defense workers to get much closer to ground zero than before, some sitting in trenches alongside troops. A sense of patriotic duty dominated. Newspaper images depicted civil defense workers carefully organizing supplies as well as "practicing crouching against the shock of an atomic bomb."³¹ Shirley Smith, speaking on behalf of the female volunteers heading out to Cue, noted some initial hesitancy over the live exercise, "But none of us is afraid. We all believe in civil defense."³² One newspaper editorial simply put it, "America needs her heroes now."³³ Attendees often downplayed the sense of risk and danger, especially following the event. One female observer explained, "I really didn't mind it at all, I rather expected something much more violent," as if outwardly sighing with relief.³⁴ For observer Dewey Swicegood, positioned seven miles from ground zero, the lasting impression was the novelty of having "his left shoe blown off" by the blast. The risks seemed slight compared to the greater threat of Soviet aggression.³⁵

Residents and businesses of Las Vegas equally showed support for the tests. As Costandina Titus observes, a distinctive bomb culture developed in Sin City during the 1950s.³⁶ Casinos introduced the 'atomic cocktail' to celebrate the first test series in 1951, and hotels went on to advertise tourist packages based around bomb watching. As open tests designed to court media attention, Annie and Apple 2 afforded far more commercial opportunities than other events at Nevada Test Site. A downtown restaurant launched a new "atomic hamburger" to celebrate Apple 2.³⁷ The manager of the Sands

³⁰ Crandall sent his own letter to the Las Vegas Police thanking them for "cooperation and help" in arranging the events, including the police's "coffee and doughnut detail." I. R. Cy Crandall to Colonel Charles E. McCarthy, Las Vegas Police, 13 June 1952, NSM, MS28, Box 1, Folder 1.

³¹ "Women Practice Crouch for A-Bomb Shock," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 April 1955.

³² Shirley Smith, "Cool Mannequins Await Ordeal by Fire," *Oakland Tribune*, 25 April 1955.

³³ Dorothy Shaver, "Civil Defense Action Heroism with Heroics," editorial, *Las Vegas Sun*, 24 April 1955.

³⁴ Charles Murphy, "Outcasts of Yucca Flats," *Life* magazine, 30 March 1953.

³⁵ "Observer Loses Shoe from Atomic Blast," *Albuquerque Journal*, 20 March 1953.

³⁶ See Titus, *Bombs in the Backyard*, 86–100.

³⁷ Alan Jarlson, "Inside Las Vegas," *Las Vegas Sun*, 26 April 1955.

Casino on Highway 91, one of several hotels and casinos to host the thousand-strong observers, compiled a list of press opportunities afforded by Operation Cue. Test observers received official FCDA blue badges decorated with white mushroom clouds on entry to Vegas, highlighting their status as welcome guests, while the city newspaper underlined Cy Crandall's request for locals to "extend every courtesy to the visitors."³⁸ Referencing the special relationship between Sin City and Nevada Test Site, FCDA organizer Frank Carroll wrote to Crandall in 1953, "you have the most enviable assignment in civil defense work anywhere," in reference to the level of local enthusiasm for the atom.³⁹ One Vegas housewife, Mrs. Marion Jacoby, even requested to stay at Doom Town during the 1955 blast, likening her act to Columbus, or in her words, "just another case of pioneering."⁴⁰

Las Vegas demonstrated their loyalty to the military and its atomic testing program in outwardly public, sometimes humorous, displays. When adverse weather delayed Apple 2, Copagirl Linda Lawson was duly anointed "Mis-Cue," and sported an "A-Bomb Crown" for photographers, while a two-year-old boy at the poolside who accidentally lost his shorts while waving at a helicopter was duly snapped and named "Mr. Fallout."⁴¹ Jake Freedman at the Sands meanwhile courteously put the atomic guests, now requiring extended stays, before his regular clientele, writing to those with reservations to inform them "of why the Sands cannot accommodate you at this time": "This area is now engaged in very serious Atomic Explosion Tests, with more than 2000 Government people, Press, State Governors, and Official Observers," and "these people who have to do this serious job cannot leave the Sands and Las Vegas until their mission is fulfilled." Freedman stressed that "our first responsibility at this time is to the National Defense effort."⁴² Issues of civil defense took primacy over leisure time even in the entertainment capital of Las Vegas.

Others in Vegas adapted to the explosions out at the test site as if it was just another aspect of living in the city that never sleeps. Resident Robert Norman

³⁸ John F. Cahlan, "Expensive 'Premier' Set Sunday," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 24 April 1955.

³⁹ Frank S. Carroll, FCDA, WDC, to I. R. Cy Crandall, 14 April 1953, NSM, MS28, Box 1, Folder 15.

⁴⁰ "Housewife Wants to Stay in Shelter for A-Blast," *Las Vegas Sun*, 30 April 1955.

⁴¹ Freeman Company Relations, "Report on Atomic Test Press at Sands," 11 May 1955, University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), Sands Collection, Box 49, Folder 3.

⁴² Jake Freedman, the Sands, to Our Sands Reservations, 26 April 1955, UNLV, Sands Collection, Box 49, Folder 3. At the same time, Freedman assured "our press, atomic test observers, and government friends" that during the postponements and inevitable "restlessness ... your accommodations here are yours until your mission is completed." Jake Freedman, the Sands, to Our Press, Atomic Test Observers, and Government Friends, 26 April 1955, UNLV, Sands Collection, Box 49, Folder 3.

related his early morning “plans to sit in his comfortable front room with a hot cup of coffee and view the [1953] burst via television.”⁴³ Only a couple of years into the test series, nuclear blasts seemed relatively normalized. One reporter suggested, “You could detonate an atom bomb and the boys and girls of Las Vegas High School probably wouldn’t bother to look up,” as “to these youngsters, A-bombs are old hat.”⁴⁴ Similarly, Virgil Pinkley for the *Salt Lake Tribune* found the “blasé citizens” of Las Vegas more interested in the weather and sports fixtures than in bomb tests.⁴⁵

Further afield, exposure to Doom Town ranged from witnessing the mushroom cloud travel across state lines to watching coverage at home on television. Residents of Utah found their televisions go dark at the time of the Apple 2 blast, likely due to technical difficulties, but some witnessed the event firsthand outside their homes. One Utah patrol officer enthused how the atomic cloud from Apple 2 made Mount Baldy in Beaver County “turn to a beautiful hue, almost like a rainbow,” revealing a sense of wonder at the effect.⁴⁶ TWA jet passengers that morning similarly watched the cloud but from their aircraft windows, while residents of Pasadena felt the earth shake.⁴⁷ Dallas car dealer D. L. Johnson donated one of his automobiles, but with the proviso of its return, noting, “I would like to have my car regardless of the condition it might be in.”⁴⁸ Johnson interpreted his donation as a patriotic gesture, but wanted the option to display the damaged car to advertise his business. Loyal and largely trusting of government information, not to say “indoctrination,” many Americans initially supported the Doom Town tests.

LABELING DISASTER

In February 1955, Harold Goodwin at Civil Defense Operations highlighted in a memo how the AEC-approved moniker of Operation Cue had been “selected to keep reporters from hanging ‘Operation Doomtowntown’ or ‘Operation Shamrock’ and such stuff on the open shot.”⁴⁹ Goodwin was concerned over the power of newspaper headlines to shape public opinion, as with

⁴³ “North Las Vegas Hopeful to see Blast on TV Set,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 17 March 1953.

⁴⁴ “Atom Bombs No Longer Interest Vegas Pupils,” *Albuquerque Tribune*, 27 April 1955.

⁴⁵ Virgil Pinkley, “Pinkley Reveals Lack of Secrecy around A-Bombs,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 16 March 1953.

⁴⁶ “Utahns See Horizon Painted by Blast,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 17 March 1953.

⁴⁷ “Airliner Passengers Looked Down on Blast,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 18 March 1953.

⁴⁸ Letter from D. L. Johnson, Johnson Bros. Chevrolet, Dallas, to Cy Crandall, LV Nevada, 31 March 1953, NSM, MS36, Box 1, Folder 4.

⁴⁹ Harold Goodwin, Civil Defense Operations, to William Allaire et al., press release, 21 Feb. 1955, NV0143426.

Doorstep two years earlier, where negative language proliferated. Rather than Survival Town, Doom Town featured in most headlines across 1953 and 1955, with newspapers commonly printing “Doom Town, Nev.” as the geographic location of reporting. The official moniker of Survival Town mostly went ignored, buried in the main text, or even actively mocked, as in one *Los Angeles Times* cartoon depicting the grim reaper wandering the radioactive rubble of “Survival City.”⁵⁰

The stories beneath the headlines often did little to muster positivity or enthusiasm. Whether for entertainment value, for reader interest, or out of genuine skepticism over nuclear policy, journalists often chose a critical tone over the Doom Town story, depicting a scene of utter carnage as the result of both tests. At both Annie and Apple 2, gigantic explosions blew the towns apart, dismembered mannequin residents, and left a trail of radioactive smoke, dust, and debris. The resultant images of destruction, widely distributed on television and analyzed by the press, stood in stark contrast to the FCDA’s original illusions of positivity and “survival.” Assembling photographs of broken mannequins, dilapidated cars, and destroyed buildings, journalists forged a convincing diorama of atomic death. In particular, popular media pushed two images repeatedly: that of a city in ruins and that of the American family facing death. The public saw the damage, read these stories, and made their own minds up about civil defense and nuclear testing.

A CITY IN RUINS

In the summer of 1953, *Nevada Highways and Parks* magazine ran a feature article on nuclear testing. The glossy magazine offered a rare description of News Nob, the traditional press viewing area at Nevada Test Site, and the arid climate surrounding it, noting how “Joshua trees, greasewood bushes and some wild grasses manage to grow in the desert soil. That’s all. The rest of the landscape is a dusty, brown-colored, dry lakebed.”⁵¹ In its depiction of arid Nevada as a near-wasteland, the article intimated a synergy between local ecology and locally based military activities. The aesthetic barrenness of the desert suited the testing of all-powerful weapons that turned everything into radioactive dust. The atomic bomb seemed perfectly in keeping with its surroundings.

⁵⁰ “Doom Town Boy Makes Good” cartoon, *Los Angeles Times*, 7 May 1955.

⁵¹ *Nevada Highways and Parks*, 13, 2 (June–Dec. 1953), 4. Kirk, “Rereading the Nature of Atomic Doom Towns,” 635–36, goes as far as to claim that “graphic documentation of the tests, both by accident and by design, created misperceptions of the Nevada desert as an empty wasteland.”

The magazine cautioned against the use of nuclear weapons anywhere outside the test zone, or, in a practical sense, expanding the blast radius: “So far, thank God, these holocausts occur on the Nevada desert where no one is harmed, but those forces of energy can be used for good or evil.”⁵² While “the holocaust” appeared safely confined to the desert, abject fear lay in what might happen if the bomb, under malevolent control, was deployed outside the barbed wire of the test site, and used against an American town or city, for example. No American city had experienced such a direct encounter with the nuclear age.

The FCDA nonetheless did something truly significant in March 1953 and May 1955; it brought the metropolis to the bomb. It constructed “Doom Town” in the desert. Building a familiar American townscape in the military zone dramatically shifted national perspective on atomic matters.

In the 1950s, the camera at atomic tests typically focussed skywards, attention cast on the distinctive fungal-like nebulous forms that accompanied each above-ground detonation. As Scott Kirsch explains, the AEC consciously “aestheticized” the bomb, in the process crafting attractive “nuclear landscape photographs” for popular consumption.⁵³ The singular mushroom cloud quickly came to dominate multiple perspectives on the bomb, its iconic form facilitating a range of views on the atomic age. The mushroom cloud itself embodied notions of the monumental and sublime; it gave the atom a natural, even organic, outline, but also highlighted its deadly powers and reach. It signified technological prowess and military majesty, but also political failure and, in the event of accidental release, reckless stupidity. It was proudly American-designed and -militarized, but also the prime symbol of Soviet danger. For nuclear protesters, the cloud came to signify global annihilation, its aerial vastness only amplifying the danger posed by radioactivity. While capable of covering vast distances (radioactive embers from the test series even reaching New York City), it also seemed strangely distant, dislocated, and, for some, even harmless. With a mushroom cloud on its front cover, the summer issue of *Nevada Highways and Parks* magazine still welcomed tourists to the region, insistent that, “there is no danger to travel over Nevada highways from radioactive ‘fall out particles.’”⁵⁴

The shift of camera lens away from the mushroom cloud, and toward the artificial cityscape below, generated a fresh perspective at Doom Town.

⁵² *Nevada Highways and Parks*, 17.

⁵³ Scott Kirsch, “Watching the Bombs Go Off: Photography, Nuclear Landscapes, and Spectator Democracy,” *Antipode*, 24, 3 (1997), 227–55, 237. The process of “aestheticizing” no doubt connects with a broader fetishizing of the atom bomb, as discussed by Gabrielle Hecht in “A Cosmogram for Nuclear Things,” *Isis*, 98, 1 (March 2007), 100–8.

⁵⁴ *Nevada Highways and Parks*, 3.

Suddenly, the hazy fog lifted, and possibilities for new interpretation dawned. The atomic cloud no longer occupied center stage; its meaning was temporarily diminished. Attention focussed on life beneath the mushroom cloud. As already mentioned, the FCDA attempted to marshal the change of direction, allying Survival Town with themes of positive transformation. An official Doorstep documentary imparted how Yucca Flats, “a barren area of desert,” was being transformed by the projects of the AEC, the FCDA, and other authorities, so that “sagebrush and Joshua tree comes alive with activity.”⁵⁵ Rather than a wasteland and national “sacrifice zone” (as Valerie Kuletz calls it), the desert appeared alive and productive.⁵⁶ It seemed almost as though the artificial construction of Survival Towns could bring vitality and meaning to the wilderness. In the lead-up to both tests, camera operators explored the suburbs of FCDA invention, places created almost overnight and at startling speed, and recorded scenes of domestic bliss and consumer abundance. For the first time, the atom combined with the classic view from American suburbia, a world of white picket fences, manicured lawns, and fashionable automatons. Everything seemed positive and strangely familiar.

However, all this changed when the atomic bomb exploded. News coverage relayed the almost complete destruction of Survival Town, and with it the loss of American homes and suburban families. Cameras zoomed in on the crushed buildings and twisted steel girders. The built exhibition spaces seemed no match for the atomic arsenal. Rather than projecting images of “survival,” news stories turned negative, focussing on themes of demise and ruin, and people responded with fear. Headlines stressed a culture of catastrophe. As if covering an actual, lived disaster, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* simply announced, “Dust Piles over ‘Dead’ in Nevada’s Doom Town.”⁵⁷

Images at Doom Town called on a growing “collective imagination” of disaster that included popular literature and film. In the 1950s, writers and filmmakers had already begun to explore nuclear war and its threat to urban and suburban America, gradually creating their own fictive Doom Towns. By the end of the decade, cultural appraisals of the bomb had taken a decidedly critical tone, with fictional disaster towns commonplace. Philip Wylie’s novel *Tomorrow!* (1961) depicted the Midwest cities of Green Prairie and River City undergoing attack, monster movies such as *Them!* (1954) showed Los Angeles

⁵⁵ Civil Defense Films, *Operation Doorstep* (1953) documentary.

⁵⁶ Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental and Social Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 7.

⁵⁷ Archie Teague, “Dust Piles Over ‘Dead’ in Nevada’s Doom Town,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 8 May 1955.

in peril, while director Stanley Kramer's adaptation of *On the Beach* (1959) imagined the cities of San Francisco and San Diego deserted and silent.⁵⁸

Doom Town added its own distinctive twist to the cultural processing. It stressed, in a highly visual way, the fragility of the American metropolis before a watchful national audience. Widely distributed pictures of destroyed homes and mangled families burnt images of destruction on the public retina. With an estimated 100 million Americans watching Operation Cue live on television, Doom Town delivered a truly national image of ruin. The public consumed these images of disaster, dissecting them at home, while making connections between events at Nevada Test Site and possible events to come.

Specific presentations of Doom Town assisted in the act of dissection. Camera operators captured the staggering speed of transformation that accompanied the nuclear attack and made it accessible to the naked eye. Official time-lapse photography at Doorstep showed House No. 1, situated 3,500 feet from ground zero, being blown apart over a period of just 2.3 seconds. Like Eadweard Muybridge's cabinet images of "The Horse in Motion" in the 1870s, which revealed a horse's speedy gallop, the 1953 film reel disclosed the pace of atomic damage, revealing its scale and accurately capturing its motion. The widely distributed time-lapse pictures helped the audience to see the action slowed down, closely analyze the destruction, and better understand the imperiled situation. Placed together, the series of images symbolized a country on the precipice of atomic war: of life proceeding as normal one second, then, in the next, disrupted and destroyed.

Newspapers attempted to guide their readers, deploying the "before" and "after" pictures to highlight what to learn from the "boom and bust" city in the desert. A column of three photographs on the front page of the *Las Vegas Sun* depicted first "a modest home in the desert ... serene and peaceful ... facing the rising of the morning sun," then the building "enveloped by fire," and the final shot of "total destruction ... a few seconds after the bomb burst ... nothing was left of the typical American home."⁵⁹ Like casinos in Vegas, Doom Town was a structure constructed and imploded in record time. Headlines such as "A-Boom Town Is a Doomtoun," drew on pioneer myth and legend, situating the FCDA's creations as little different from Gold Rush towns going bust and emerging as ghost towns.

⁵⁸ For more on atomic movies see Mike Bogue, *Apocalypse Then: American and Japanese Atomic Cinema, 1951–1967* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017); Cynthia Hendershot, *Paranoia, the Bomb, and 1950s Science Fiction Films* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999); and Jerome Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁵⁹ Colin McKinlay, "Tanks Shield Observers from Atom Blast Effects," *Las Vegas Sun*, 6 May 1955.

Emphasizing the evanescent qualities of the event, John Cahlan for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* labelled Doom Town II “the city that was built to live for but one day.”⁶⁰

Rather than a hand-drawn sketch of disaster, common to much civil defense material, Doom Town existed as actual photographic film and documented evidence for the public to process. With not much imagination, viewers across the country envisaged their own homes lying in the rubble and their own towns destroyed. As one Utah citizen, planning to migrate to Nevada, asked worriedly, “If Boulder Dam were hit by an atomic bomb, would Las Vegas be leveled? Would Las Vegas get radioactive burns?”⁶¹ Or as volunteer Shirley Smith noticed, “that two-story frame house – only a scant two miles from ‘ground zero’ – that, by an odd quirk of coincidence, is almost an exact duplicate of my own gray and white home at 1065 Ardmore Ave.”⁶² In Las Vegas, resident Cable B. Jones recognized the vulnerability of his own home to attack and set about designing “atomic resistant” walls.⁶³ The use of television, in particular, proved capable of “taking viewers right into the devastated area while they sit in their homes surrounded by their families.”⁶⁴ Images on the television screen brought Doom Town into the domestic suburban setting, forcing people to directly confront the lurking nuclear danger.

The visual bombardment of images from Doom Town on national television and in the press galvanized the public imagination. Arguably, Doom Town offered Americans their own “Hiroshima” in the public imaginary. Doom Town amounted to an indisputably *American* nuclear disaster. Uneasy over the lingering effects of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on public opinion, the FCDA had previously downplayed atomic damage on the Axis power. *Survival under Atomic Attack* highlighted survival rates at both Japanese cities, and even pointed to the benefits of “thousands of survivors” now able to “live in new houses built right where their old ones once stood.”⁶⁵ Many nonetheless quietly feared a Hiroshima-style event on the American mainland. *Nevada Parks and Highways* magazine related, “Just

⁶⁰ “A-Boom Town Is a Dooms town,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 26 April 1955; Cahlan, “Expensive ‘Premier’ Set Sunday.”

⁶¹ Director of civil defense in Las Vegas, Crandall replied to Mr. Duvall, “We do not have any Bomb Shelters in this area if Boulder Dam is attacked,” and suggested reading some FCDA booklets. Duvall’s letter and Crandall’s reply (5 April 1955) at NSM, MS28, Box 2, Folder 14.

⁶² Smith, “Cool Mannequins.”

⁶³ Joe McClain, “Vegas Resident Designs Atomic Resistant Wall,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 15 March 1953.

⁶⁴ Walter Ames, “Atomic Blast to Show Civilians After Effects in Pooled Telecast Tomorrow,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 March 1953.

⁶⁵ *Survival under Atomic Attack*, 2.

thinking of the terrible toll which is possible makes the shivers run up and down your spine.”⁶⁶ Conscious or not, journalists compared the open tests at Nevada to the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and twinned the explosions on Japanese soil with homegrown disaster. Convenient reference points for damage, the Japanese examples returned again and again. The *New York Times* described Apple 2 as “twice as powerful” as Hiroshima, while the *Oakland Tribune* noted that the 40,000 tons of TNT at Apple 2 amounted to “twice the punch of the ‘Model T’ atom bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.”⁶⁷ But the similarity went much deeper than the statistics – the atom bomb now posed a fundamental threat to every American city, and, thanks to the extensive media coverage, millions of Americans knew it.

AN AMERICAN (FAMILY) HORROR STORY

Part of the distinctiveness of Doom Town also came from its population. The residents, a range of mannequin “families” placed around various homes, granted the project an uncanny yet relatable quality, but stopped short of using live actors (as in the UK, where the Casualties Union staged wartime injuries).⁶⁸ The atomic age had so far lacked American “victims” – while the bombs had leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki (not to mention the poisoning of the Japanese trawler *Daigo Fukuryū Maru*), on the domestic front casualties had proved negligible. At Doom Town I and II, the FCDA created new casualties of war. The FCDA presented the residents of Doom Town as quintessentially American, then sacrificed them in a highly public atomic experiment. Americans across the nation watched their mannequin counterparts be poisoned and blown apart. They watched their avatars die before a nuclear onslaught.

For the FCDA, the use of mannequins was scientific, educational, and deliberately provocative. The official tone varied from factual and informative to mildly menacing. FCDA talk of “children at play unaware of approaching disaster” presented the kids of Doom Town as naive and innocent. However,

⁶⁶ *Nevada Highways and Parks*, 17.

⁶⁷ Gladwin Hill, “Stand-Ins Set Up for Atomic Test,” *New York Times*, 25 Apr 1955; “Specter of Ruin Stalks A-Test City,” *Oakland Tribune*, 25 April 1955.

⁶⁸ See Tracy C. Davis, “Stages of Emergency: The Casualties Union,” *Modern Drama*, 26, 2 (Summer 2003), 151–81. Davis notes the significance of the relationship between actor and spectator in disaster drills, that “to become immersed in the ‘grand narrative’ – to believe these actual casualties of nuclear war – would require spectators also to believe themselves to be nuclear war survivors.” *Ibid.*, 176. At Doom Town, this reciprocity was complicated by mannequins, not live actors, “playing” the role of survivors, and the American public being asked to “imagine” themselves at a clearly fabricated suburban setting.

labeling “dead” mannequins “the result of being unprepared” shifted blame onto both fictional and real-life families of America. Warning citizens, “there is no second best for family’s civil defense,” the FCDA reminded everyone to act now, “Or will you, like a mannequin, just sit and wait?”⁶⁹

The FCDA’s assertion of typicality and resemblance targeted the masses like never before in defense drills. The official Cue documentary referred to one Survival Town couple as “Mr. and Mrs. America,” an encouragement for all viewers to visualize themselves as Doom Town residents.⁷⁰ In reality, what the administration created was a collection of white, slim, decidedly middle-class dolls far from representative of demographic diversity or national trends.⁷¹ The press uniformly failed to comment on this racial, class-based discrepancy, of how the mannequins of Nevada Test Site failed to speak for all citizens. In terms of color and class, journalists uncritically accepted the contrived image of “the American family.”

The press nonetheless deviated from the official message in other ways. As Robert Jacobs notes, “Many American magazines found images of mannequin victims of atomic blasts strangely fascinating.”⁷² The placement of mannequins in the Survival Towns facilitated a creative, largely negative, depiction of civil defense. Doom Town mannequins became the lead stars of horror fiction, ciphers for political commentary on nuclear testing, symbols of the imperiled state of the 1950s family, and valuable witnesses for reporters keen to document a “fake” atomic war.

In excessive detail, newspaper articles homed in on the dark fates experienced by Mr. and Mrs. America. Journalists documented the physical damage done to the Doom Town families in graphic detail. A reporter for the *Los Angeles Examiner*, who experienced the Apple 2 blast from the safety of a trench, used the mannequin sequestered near him to highlight the horror of the occasion, drawing attention to the “male mannequin, seated in a chair outside the trench, whipped backward, a rock-torn hole in his head.”⁷³ As if gathering forensic evidence, journalists listed the physical scars and injuries to mannequins littered across the desert landscape.

In the process of cataloguing injuries, journalists presented the mannequins to their readers as dutiful yet sacrificial test subjects. With the purpose of

⁶⁹ Civil Defense Films, *Operation Doorstep*.

⁷⁰ FCDA, *Operation Cue* (1955) documentary.

⁷¹ Bishop, *Every Home a Fortress*, 37, notes how civil defense planners rarely tackled “issues of race and class”; instead “their propaganda erased distinctions of race, class, and gender expression outside of the rigid heteronormative binary of the nuclear family.” The white focus of civil defense is also noted by Sarah Alisabeth Fox in *Downwind: A People’s History of the Nuclear West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 128.

⁷² Jacobs, *The Dragon’s Tail*, 19.

⁷³ “Atom Blast Razes ‘Town’; None Hurt,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, 6 May 1955.

Nevada Test Site widely understood as exploratory – one newspaper called it simply an “outdoor laboratory” – Doorstep and Cue signified the latest in a long line of experiments there, with the mannequins likened to other test site guinea pigs.⁷⁴ The *Albuquerque Journal* described “the ‘guinea pigs’ human and otherwise” gathered at Doom Town I, including in its list not just ‘plastic people,’ but “high ranking generals,” and “rugged Marines.”⁷⁵ A number of journalists remarked on the unfortunate fate of “mannequin soldiers” gathered at the test site. Writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, Marvin Miles saw “a headless soldier, a fully uniformed wax model, lying sprawled in the desert sage, a grotesquely torn trooper ripped by every Yucca Flat explosion since the beginning of the 1953 test series” (the “trooper” was presumably used at Annie), while reporter Joe McClain noted a dummy soldier nicknamed “Old Joe” positioned in a tent just two thousand yards from ground zero, about to be “fatally burned.”⁷⁶ The grim fate of “Old Joe” and others alluded to bigger questions over the treatment of “live” troops in Nevada, especially given the experimental nature of each test. Likewise, when newspapers published headlines such as “EXPENDABLE! The Entire Population of Doom Town II, USA,” doubtless some readers reflected on who else might be considered dispensable.⁷⁷

Press stories also entertained the notion of the 1950s nuclear family under attack. Pre-blast imagery depicted families huddled together in dining rooms, watching television together. Photographs presented female mannequins, dressed in their J. C. Penney high fashion, as models of the new atomic age, much like Miss Cue and other atomic beauty pageant queens at Vegas. The *LA Examiner* printed a picture of a halter-top-wearing female stacking food, a glamorous housewife preparing for Armageddon.⁷⁸ Post-blast images then told a different story altogether. Archie Teague, writing for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, painted a picture of complete domestic collapse, of homes where “vagrant sands sifted through the wrecked doors and shattered windows ... but the housewives of this model city made no moves for their brooms.” Teague instead found the “women ... blasted apart by the terrifying atomic weapon ... the plaster and paint of their mannequin bodies lay in cluttered piles on the floors of their homes.”⁷⁹ Everything seemed lost.

⁷⁴ William C. Patrick, “Operation Cue Observers Briefed,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 24 April 1955.

⁷⁵ Bob Considine, “Variety of Objects to Be Subjected to A-Bomb in Civil Defense Test,” *Albuquerque Journal*, 24 April 1955.

⁷⁶ Marvin Miles, “Test Village Awaits Effect of Atom Blast,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 April 1955; Joe McClain, “Go ’Way, Bird, Your Armor Is Too Thin for A-Blast,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 25 April 1955.

⁷⁷ “Expendable! The Entire Population of ‘Doom Town II, USA,’” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 25 April 1955.

⁷⁸ “A-Boom Town Is a Doomtown.”

⁷⁹ Teague, “Dust Piles Over ‘Dead’.”

The most imaginative stories of Doom Town gave voice to the lost and disenchanted. Reporters offered spoof interviews with town residents, McClain delivering “an ‘exclusive interview’” with “Junior Darling,” a six-year-old “survivor” of the blast, thanks to the boy following his “Kitty Cat” to the make-shift bomb shelter, now rendered “an orphan when the remainder of his family was wiped out in the holocaust.” “Darling Jnr” used the interview to blame his negligent father, explaining, “Poor mama, daddy and my little brothers and sisters are dead because daddy just wouldn’t listen to the type of house mama wanted ... one of those low concrete block houses.”⁸⁰ While offering some FCDA-friendly advice over house construction, the interview mostly came across as a dark and disturbing piece of science fiction, more akin to a *Twilight Zone* episode than to serious news journalism.

McClain’s disturbing interview with a mannequin orphan nonetheless showed how Doom Town emerged simultaneously as both horror story *and* defense story in the public imaginary. Press coverage consistently asserted a deep malevolence at work. Touring the test site prior to Cue, Miles highlighted a sense of innate danger there, of a deathly landscape littered by “blackened tanks, trucks, and other vehicles,” with the Apple 2 shot tower standing as an “evil magnet,” and Doom Town cast as a frightening “Terror Town.”⁸¹ Another journalist simply described “Hell at Yucca Flats.”⁸² Doom Town emerged as more a freak show than a scientific investigation. Alongside undermining any hope of survival, the horror quotient likely reflected the journalists’ processing their own fears and anxieties while gathered to witness the atomic tests firsthand, then in turn passing such fears on to avid readers. Miles, on placement inside a military vehicle, captured better than most the full scale of bearing witness when he wrote of the “paralyzing, terrifying thunder – like a crashing fulmination of hell – smashed into our 50-ton Patton tank with a single lash of demoniacal rage.”⁸³

Doom Town thus formed in the popular mind-set as more dark entertainment than scientific discovery. Its links with Hollywood and horror naturally grew. Disturbing, creepy scenes of deformed mannequins in collapsed ruins at Doom Town resembled Gothic horror tropes. Journalist John Cahlan labelled the live film coverage of Doom Town II “the world’s most expensive ‘premier’” and “one of the greatest horror programs ever produced.”⁸⁴ Like *Godzilla*, *Them!*, and a range of other period B-movies, the Doom Town film reels depicted mutation, destruction, and death as central to the new

⁸⁰ Joe McClain, “Editor Interviews Survivor,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 7 May 1955.

⁸¹ Miles. ⁸² “Big Atomic Shot Did This,” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 6 May 1955.

⁸³ Marvin Miles, “50-Tonner Rocked for 7 Seconds,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 May 1955.

⁸⁴ Cahlan, “Expensive ‘Premier’ Set Sunday.”

atomic imaginary of the 1950s. In December 1954, just a year after Doorstep, Mickey Rooney starred in *The Atomic Kid*, a black-and-white dark comedy directed by Leslie H. Martinson. In the movie, Rooney himself emerges from Doom Town as a “radioactive survivor” before uncovering a national spy ring. Film critic Howard Thompson for the *New York Times* judged *The Atomic Kid* a weak comedy: “Five minutes or so are genuinely funny, the rest is a fair, misguided try.”⁸⁵ Instead, the atom, and Doom Town, seemed far better suited to the genre of horror.

Such fear, fatalism, and horror could also be detected in the public’s response to the two experiments. Invited to the 1953 test, Mrs. Rae Ashton from Utah, president of the American Legion Women’s Auxiliary, struggled to process how a bomb far smaller than those planned for wartime use could cause so much devastation. Scared and petrified, Ashton felt “spun like a child’s toy top.” With the impact of just “a teaspoon bomb still hard to believe,” she concluded, “I really believe that someday science could destroy the whole world.”⁸⁶ No doubt those who watched the event live on television felt similarly worried. Twenty-one-year-old housewife Violet Keppers from Missouri, on witnessing the same test, imparted, “I saw a stairway to hell . . . and it made me cry,” evoking a sense of escalating peril in Cold War society.⁸⁷ Catholic nuns meanwhile gathered in prayer nearby.⁸⁸ At the 1955 test, one Californian woman compared the atomic blast to a natural disaster, relating, “My experience as a California veteran of earthquakes came in mighty handy.”⁸⁹ The female voices, part of a broader attempt to “bring American women into the fold of civil defense practices,” revealed the emotional intensity of witnessing a nuclear blast firsthand, and a new wavering line over whether humankind could survive the atomic age.⁹⁰

TWIN TOWNS

While the FCDA promoted its twin Survival Towns as stories of American civil defense triumphing against the odds, operations Doorstep and Cue instead furnished powerful and lingering images of a nation’s end. The

⁸⁵ H.H.T., “Rooney Is ‘Atomic Kid’ in Film on Palace Bill,” *New York Times*, 4 Dec. 1954. Doom Town later appeared in the horror movie *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006) and action-adventure film *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008).

⁸⁶ “Just a ‘Teaspoon’ Bomb Hard to Believe,” *Albuquerque Journal*, 18 March 1953.

⁸⁷ *A Housewife Watches the A Bomb*, Missouri Civil Defense Agency pamphlet (1953), NSM, MS36, Box 1, Folder 25.

⁸⁸ The nuns prayed at Angel’s Peak as Annie detonated. “Troops in Foxholes View ‘Greatest Show on Earth,’” *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, 17 March 1953.

⁸⁹ “Sight I’ll Never Forget,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, 6 May 1955.

⁹⁰ Robey, *Atomic Americans*, 83.

atomic bomb had been brought to American soil, and US goods, families, and know-how had been tested. Unfortunately, the results hardly befitted the moniker of “survival,” and scenes of carnage challenged any outright message of positivity. The dual identity of Survival Town/Doom Town illustrated the broader contradictions of FCDA campaigns in the 1950s. As Masco explains, the agency regularly bombarded Americans with scenes of both *survival* and *death*, a fundamentally flawed strategy that “asked them to live on the knife’s edge of psychotic contradiction.”⁹¹ At Doom Town, the “psychotic contradiction” manifested in the polar extremes of, on the one hand, a suburban family, Mr. and Mrs. America, living in perfect bliss at Survival Town, and on the other, twisted corpses buried under radioactive rubble following a surprise Soviet attack. The two images captured the deepest hopes and fears of 1950s society, and thus could never be easily reconciled. Even more worrying for the American public, only 2.3 seconds separated them.

While isolated events in the Nevada desert, tests Annie and Apple 2, like every other atmospheric detonation in the period, sent their deadly radioactive plumes across the United States. In similar fashion, Doorstep and Cue produced their own kind of fallout. Touted as public spectacles and broadcast extensively across national media, the FCDA experiments contributed to a shift in anxiety toward the atom. Millions of Americans watched Doorstep live on television; the figure reached upward of 100 million viewers for Cue. The two “open” tests gave credence to a growing unease over radioactivity and nuclear weaponry. Doorstep and Cue highlighted a shift in terms of press coverage, toward more open criticism of atomic issues, and a shift in public attitude toward fear and fatalism. Doom Town increased fears for city dwellers over their ability to survive a domestic nuclear war, as well as raising questions over the chances of any family surviving. Part of a broader, cultural turn against atomic energy, the FCDA operations provided distressing visual evidence to Americans of what a nuclear war might entail.

The open tests also allowed more than just the FCDA to shape the public dialogue. As Masco observes, staged events such as Cue represented “melodramas of the nuclear age,” which the FCDA hoped “focused citizens on emotional self-discipline.”⁹² The narrator for the official Doorstep documentary explained how the agency was “ready to bring to the families of America this drama of survival under the A-bomb,” as if directing actors in a play.⁹³ In a sense, the FCDA set up a sophisticated entertainment production, a theatrical stage where mannequins acted out their everyday lives beneath the mushroom cloud, and left the cameras running and invited the nation in.

⁹¹ Masco, “Survival Is Your Business,” 376.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 372, 376.

⁹³ Civil Defense Films, *Operation Doorstep*.

Free to watch at News Nob or live on television, audiences mostly responded to Doom Town by providing their own interpretation, stories, and even content. In contrast to passively watching a monster movie like *Them!*, audiences actively imagined themselves as the mannequin residents sequestered at Nevada Test Site, encouraged by both FCDA rhetoric (of “you, like a mannequin”) and the believability of the event (as Tracy Davis notes on disaster performance and planning, “detail lends realism”).⁹⁴ Doom Town connected with new public performances of “nuclear disaster,” most famously Duck and Cover drills at American schools, but presented an altogether darker tone than Bert the Turtle, and a more ominous fate. Images of destruction in Nevada translated into poignantly realistic stories of horror in the press and the wider cultural imaginary, and Doom Town transitioned into a very American-style Hiroshima event. The two towns came to encapsulate myriad fears about the atomic age, all effectively gathered around one “ground zero” for all to view. Based on widely distributed images of damaged houses and broken mannequins, the most dominant story emerged as one of horror. With Doom Town’s mannequin family left lifeless on the lounge floor, the real Mr. and Mrs. America looked on, disturbed and scared.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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⁹⁴ Davis, “Stages of Emergency,” 160.