Gimme Shelter

by

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The movies have had a dramatic and everlasting effect on my life. For me, viewing films has entertained, evoked memories of past experiences and stirred a new consciousness. As has happened several times in the past, my inspiration for this paper came from viewing two different films. Previously, my paper on the Middle Ages and how coffee precipitated the Renaissance was partly inspired by viewing Monty Python's The Holy Grail. My presentation about the Hell's Angels came about from a screening of The Wild One, with Marlon Brando as its young star, And, of course, the drive-in picture paper came from countless nights spent at those open air screens from early childhood to about 15 years ago. During this past year I have had occasion to view again two movies that I had earlier found to be both entertaining and thought-provoking. Watching them again sowed the seeds for this paper. The first was Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. This 1964 black comedy is about a military installation commander who sets off a chain of events that result in an atomic war. It is truly one of the funniest movies that I have ever seen and one should see it, if for no other reason than to see Peter Sellers play three roles: The President of the United States; a British Air Corps officer; and, of course, Dr. Strangelove. The second movie that I saw last year which influenced the writing of this paper was one that I had not seen for many years

War II, and the Soviet Union's bellicose behavior was the compelling reason. However, I was approaching my teenage years when these events were occurring and I simply do not remember all that was happening in the world at this frenetic time. After all, this was approximately 35 years ago. My research made very specific and frightening what my general impression and knowledge of that period had been until then. My parents' darkly comic plan to build a fallout shelter does not seem so comic when viewed from the perspective of the late 1950's and the early 1960's. What was it that was taking place in those frightening years?

Speaking on national television on July 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy unearthed fears buried deeply for more than a decade. With a Russian noose tightening around Berlin, the President said it was time to think about the unthinkable when he said, "In the event of an attack, the lives of those families which are not hit in a nuclear blast and fire can still be saved if they can be warned to take shelter and if that shelter is available." He added, "We owe that kind of insurance to our families and to our country.....the time to start is now."

For about ten years before this speech, backyard bomb shelters had been the local oddball's room addition and a barometer of neighborhood paranoia. Now, in a presidentially sanctioned speech, the survival program promised shelter

Washington, Los Angeles, or yes, even Fort Campbell, Kentucky. Some people hid their fears beneath dreams of world government or international control of nuclear weapons, but as long as America held all the nuclear cards, the most common shelter was a wall of avoidance. Albert Einstein said in 1948, "Having been warned of the horrible nature of atomic warfare, the public has done nothing about it, and to a large extent has dismissed the warning from its consciousness." The following year the Soviet Union changed our nuclear monopoly into a nuclear club, and how they got the bomb from us brings back memories of the execution of Ethyl and Julius Rosenberg as spies.

By the winter of 1950, with the Korean War raging across the world, our own skies seemed naked to the Russian enemy. Civil Defense officials talked confidently about group shelters for 50 million people, but in new subdivisions the nutty and the merely nervous were taking survival into their own hands. Shelters ranging from $13.50 for a covered cave up to $5,500 for an underground suite complete with phone and toilet became the latest fad.

Among the simplest precautions were walled-off basement corners stocked with two weeks' rations and a battery-powered radio that could be tuned to Conelrad, the new emergency network. Popular Mechanics provided the do-it-yourselfer with a wonderful shelter blueprint for basements.

bombs could blanket the country with this deadly fallout. At this point in time various tales of woe were there for the taking. Harvard satirist Tom Lehrer sang "We Will All Go Together When We Go," and Nevil Shute's best-selling novel On the Beach dealt with terminal cynicism and mass suicide among the last survivors of global radioactive poisoning. Amid rising incertitude, even the middle-of-the-road, even tempered Good Housekeeping magazine quietly suggested that its readers put aside those delicious recipes and start digging.

Numerous warnings continued to hammer on the shelter of hope, just as relentlessly as Nikita Khrushchev banging his shoe on the podium during his speech at the United Nations. The specter of Russian missiles able to strike anywhere with only a moment's notice and warning made evacuation impossible. By 1960 only 1,500 shelters sat stocked and ready, but a poll showed that 40 per cent of Americans were seriously considering building fallout shelters.

The Atomic Age's fear had its genesis on July 16, 1945 with the Trinity Project and the explosion of the first atomic bomb in the desert at Alamogordo, New Mexico, but the reason we were told by the President to start digging was a deadline Khrushchev set during a tense summit meeting in Vienna during the month of June, 1961. Khrushchev was tired of watching East Germans make Communism look bad as they streamed in droves into the

prosperous West. He wanted a new treaty removing NATO troops from Berlin and recognizing East Germany as a legitimate nation. The deadline was six months away. Throughout July, threats flew back and forth while military expenditures soared on both sides. It was in the charged atmosphere that Kennedy interrupted regularly scheduled programs like "Dobie Gillis" and "Father Knows Best" with the bleakest news Americans had ever heard on television.

Calling Berlin "....the great testing place of Western courage and will," Kennedy promised within months to '.... let every citizen know what steps he can take without delay to protect his family in case of attack." But neither citizens nor Soviets could wait. In mid-August the Berlin wall divided the city, and on September 1, a huge fireball rose over Central Russia. Ending a three yeaar bilateral moratorium on nuclear testing, Khrushchev began bragging about soon to be developed 50 to 100 megaton warheads that were big enough to wipe out entire states.

At this point even families who knew nothing of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists' Doomsday Clock, which ticked off humanity's final seconds, felt midnight's coming and began scrambling for shelter. Within days, civil defense offices nationwide ran out of shelter booklets that had sat on shelves for years. Inspired by a Life magazine article claiming shelters could

save 97 out of 100 Aamericans, the populace toured shelters outside supermarkets, in department stores and at county fairs.

Wall Street investors said that the shelter market could gross up to $20 billion in the coming year, if there was a coming year. Survival stores around the country sold air blowers, filters, flashlights, chemical toilets, plastic and lead fallout protection suits, first aid kits, food and water. General Foods and General Mills experimented with dry-packaged cereals.

The shelter frenzy was part fear and part fad, and as usual, public opinion was muddled by the experts. Edward Teller, the father of the H-bomb, said shelters could save 90 per cent of the country. Colder data came from Herman Kahn, the author of the authoritative On Thermonuclear War. "Better 20 million dead than 40 million dead," calculated Kahn, the future model for Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove. Shelter opponents trusted their own experts. "A full-scale nuclear attack would probably kill everybody, whether or not fallout shelters had been built" said Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling. Massive shelter building would inspire a pre-emptive first strike, said the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. On the contrary, said Life magazine, shelters would firm up national resolve and make our nuclear weapons more credible.

Despite the hysteria, Kennedy stuck by his plan: ".... a fallout shelter for everybody, as rapidly as posssible." The Bible

had foreseen such final destruction: "Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and strong .... hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains," said Revelations. The government took Revelations to heart and constructed a massive underground city under a mountain in the Virginia countryside not far from Washington. The place was called Mount Weather and was designed to shelter United States' leaders, both political and military, from nuclear attack. Its existence was not even officially acknowledged until 1974, when a TWA jet crashed nearby.

A year later, in October of 1962, the Cuban Missle crisis would shove the world to the brink of apocalypse for 13 days, but the tension in Berlin kept tightening for months, offering no escape from the beginning of the end. As United States and Soviet tanks rumbled toward the Berlin Wall, the shelter craze rolled relentlessly on. Said the president of the National Shelter Association: " My best salesmen are named Khrushchev and Kennedy."

The survival instinct affected corporate bodies as well as individuals. Airlines, Detroit automakers, IBM, AT&T, and Wall Street brokerage houses planned employee shelters. The Federal Reserve designated banks for postwar check cashing, though no one could accurately forecast Armageddon's effect on the dollar. A Massachusetts motel planned an underground shelter for

more than a hundred people, with half the spaces reserved for workers thought to be essential to a new world order. Among them were an estate planner, a dietician, a surgeon, a lawyer, a plumber, a dentist and a fisherman. By early autumn of 1962 builders began to notice unusual requests from their customers, such as resquests to dig shelters at night, while families elsewhere told their neighbors that they were adding wine cellars or game rooms. For once he took the step to provide fallout protection, what was going to protect the family from the neighbors. Guns were an addition to any completed fallout shelter.

As the clock ticked toward Khrushchev's December deadline, threats became the world's currency. The Soviet premier threatened to test his superbomb and Kennedy let the Defense Department publicly detail, warhead by warhead, America's nuclear edge.

On October 27, when East Germany closed the Berlin Wall's Checkpoint Charlie, American and Russian tanks sighted one another barely one hundred yards apart. The superpowers stood eyeball to eyeball. After 16 hours both sides blinked and the tanks rolled back to their usual posts.

In November, Kennedy and Khrushchev, who had been exchanging private letters for a month, agreed to talk about Berlin. Khrushchev soon withdrew the December deadline and

tensions eased. By December, when the Defense Department began posting "Fallout Shelter" signs on some buildings and stocking them with rations, the survival boom was already going bust. A government booklet on shelters lay untouched on post office counters. Kennedy, under attack for having caused the craze, retreated. "Let us concentrate more on keeping enemy bombers and missiles away from our shores and concentrate less on keeping our neighbors away from our shelters." The nation once again buried its fears. Of course now, with the collapse of the Soviet Union and ensuing removal of any real threat, the shelter craze seems just that-a craze or fad perpetuated by crazy people.

However, in light of the events that occurred in the late 1950's and early 1960's, and in light of my age now, I believe that my parents were in fact prudent in constructing a fallout shelter, even though I am sure that they suffered ridicule at the hands of their friends.

In my lifetime I have been inside three fallout shelters. The first was my family's, which I will describe in a moment. The second was a community fallout shelter in Bowling Green where I spent one uneasy night in 1965 visiting friends who actually lived there while attending Western Kentucky University. This shelter had been constructed by Bill Bogle, who apparently planned to cash in on the shelter craze by constructing this large

shelter and selling spaces to the residents of Bowling Green. I suppose if the bombs actually ever fell, one would have to present his lease agreement to enter this shelter. This facility had been converted to a type of dormitory and was simply known as "The Bomb Shelter." What remains foremost in my memory of this shelter was the constant air circulation noise that was essential to carry fresh air into the depths of this shelter housing hundreds of young men. The second shelter was also in Bowling Green and in the basement of the house of one of my fraternity brothers at Vanderbilt University. It is ironic that he is now a lawyer living in London, but with an office in Moscow as well. His parents had constructed an elaborate, hidden shelter consisting of three rooms in the basement of their home. I also spent the night in this shelter. The only shelter that I did not sleep in was my own family's shelter constructed in Owensboro. My parents' remembrances of our shelter are somewhat hazy, dimmed by both time and I'm sure sensitivity because of some ridicule in the past. I also cannot recall very much about it because I was quite young when it was constructed. I do know that it was to be a two-family shelter, the two families being mine and also the family of my parents' best friends at the time. There were five of us and four of them so that the living conditions would have been close, to say the least. Neither of the two families had a basement, but that problem was solved when

the mother of the wife of the other family volunteered her basement to construct our shelter. She did not want to be included if the shelter needed to be utilized and probably thought that we were all crazy. For several months my father and his friend spent nights and weekends working on the shelter and following civil defense- approved drawings. The weekends were limited only to Saturday mornings because my father and his friend would not miss their golf game, even in the face of nuclear disaster. My mother was not pleased with this casual attitude. I have the memory of sliding concrete block after concrete block through the basement window on a large plank to the waiting hands of my father. When the shelter was completed, we stocked it with all the necessary items and I'm sure some none-essential items because the father of the other household was also the owner of a liquor distributorship in Owensboro. After all these months of work, preparation for the work, endless discussions of whether or not even to construct a shelter, and, I'm sure, discussions on the tenuous world situation, the owner of the house received an offer she could not refuse, and she sold the house, shelter and all. My parents and their friends were devastated. I'm not sure what the new owners did- my mother believes they immediately dismantled the shelter. Other shelters have found use as wine cellars, storm cellars, mushroom gardens or sites for teenage parties. But

thousands of other nuclear bunkers lie scattered underground like so many fossils from an age of fear.