

## CHAPTER FOUR

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# EXPLOSIVE ISSUES: SEX, WOMEN, AND THE BOMB

Last night I was dreamin', dreamed about the H-bomb  
Well, the bomber went off and I was caught  
I was the only man left on the ground  
There was thirteen women and only one man in town  
And as funny as it may be, the one and only man in town was me  
Well, thirteen women and me the only man around

I had two gals every morning, seein' that I was well fed  
And believe you me, one sweetened my tea  
While another one buttered my bread  
Two gals gave me my money, two gals made me my clothes  
And another sweet thing bought me a diamond ring  
About forty carats I suppose

I had three gals dancin' the mambo  
Three gals ballin'-the-jack  
And all of the rest really did their best  
Boy, they sure were a lively pack

I thought I was in heaven, and all of these angels were mine  
But I woke up and I head for the train  
'Cause I had to get to work on time . . .

—BILL HALEY AND HIS COMETS, 1954<sup>1</sup>

BILL HALEY'S rock-and-roll ballad was one among many examples of the popular culture during the cold war that connected the unleashing of the atom and the unleashing of sex. But the connections went beyond these atomic age sexual fantasies into more frightening scenarios. In 1951, for example, Charles Walter Clarke, a Harvard physician and executive director of the American Social Hygiene Association, published a major article in the *Journal of Social Hygiene* on the dangers of atomic attack. "Following an atom bomb explosion," he wrote, "families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion. Supports of normal family and community life would be broken down. . . . There would develop among many people, especially youths . . . the reckless psychological state often seen following great disasters." The preparedness plan that Clarke devised to cope with this possibility centered not on death and destruction or psychological damage, but on the potential for sexual chaos. "Under such conditions," he continued, "moral standards would relax and promiscuity would increase." Clarke predicted that postbomb rampant sexual activity would lead to a "1,000 percent increase" in venereal disease unless "drastic preventive measures" were taken. He then called on public health professionals to help ensure that, in the event of an atomic attack, there would be adequate supplies of penicillin in potential target areas and "strict policing, . . . vigorous repression of prostitution, and measures to discourage promiscuity, drunkenness, and disorder."<sup>2</sup>

Clarke's preoccupation with sexual chaos may seem absurd in the face of the incomprehensible horror of a nuclear holocaust. Clearly, he did not represent mainstream medical opinion, since his organization had been preoccupied with venereal disease for decades. Nevertheless, his ideas struck a responsive chord among many fellow professionals who shared his concern about sexual order in the atomic age. When he sent a draft of the article to over seventy experts in medicine and public health around the country, most applauded his idea and endorsed his plan.<sup>3</sup> By linking fears of out-of-control sexuality with the insecurities of the cold war, Clarke articulated a symbolic connection that found widespread expression in professional writings, anticommunist campaigns, and the popular culture.

Fears of sexual chaos tend to surface during times of crisis and rapid social change. The depression and the war years were two such times when concern over the impending doom of the family surfaced. Clarke's article and the response it generated suggest that these concerns continued into the cold war era. Much of the anxiety focused on women, whose economic and sexual behavior seemed to have changed dramatically.<sup>4</sup> By articulating the unique form this anxiety took during the postwar years, professionals in numerous fields, government officials, and creators of the popular culture revealed the powerful sym-

bolic force of gender and sexuality in the cold war ideology and culture. It was not just nuclear energy that had to be contained, but the social and sexual fallout of the atomic age itself. Many contemporaries believed that the Russians could destroy the United States not only by atomic attack but through internal subversion. In either case, the nation had to be on moral alert. Clarke was one of many postwar experts who prescribed family stability as an antidote to these related dangers.

Nonmarital sexual behavior in all its forms became a national obsession after the war. Many high-level government officials, along with individuals in positions of power and influence in fields ranging from industry to medicine and from science to psychology, believed wholeheartedly that there was a direct connection between communism and sexual depravity. The Republican Party national chairman, Guy Gabrielson, claimed that “sexual perverts . . . have infiltrated our Government in recent years,” and they were “perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists.” The logic went as follows: National strength depended upon the ability of strong, manly men to stand up against communist threats. It was not simply a matter of general weakness leading to a soft foreign policy; rather, sexual excesses or degeneracy would make individuals easy prey for communist tactics. According to the common wisdom of the time, “normal” heterosexual behavior culminating in marriage represented “maturity” and “responsibility”; therefore, those who were “deviant” were, by definition, irresponsible, immature, and weak. It followed that men who were slaves to their passions could easily be duped by seductive women who worked for the communists. Even worse were the “perverts,” who had no masculine backbone.<sup>5</sup>

Armed with this questionable logic, anticommunists turned their wrath on homosexuals. After the war, which had fostered the emergence of same-sex communities and the increasing visibility of gay men and lesbians, the postwar years brought a wave of officially sponsored homophobia. The word *pervert* was used to describe a wide range of individuals, from adults who engaged in same-sex consensual relationships to violent criminals who raped and murdered children. The persecution of homosexual men and women became more intense than ever before. Gay baiting rivaled red baiting in its ferocity, destroying careers, encouraging harassment, creating stigmas, and forcing those who “confessed their guilt” to name others with whom they associated. In 1950, the Senate issued a report on the *Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government*, which asserted that “those who engage in overt acts of perversion lack the emotional stability of normal persons. . . . Indulgence in acts of sex perversion weakens the moral fiber of the individual.” Like communists, who would infiltrate and destroy the society, sexual “perverts” could spread their poison simply

by association. “One homosexual can pollute a Government office,” claimed the Senate report.<sup>6</sup>

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) mounted an all-out effort to discover the personal sexual habits of those under suspicion of subversive behavior, as well as all those who were seeking government employment. State and local governments followed the lead of the federal government in demanding evidence of moral probity as well as loyalty. From private industry to the military, the sexual behavior of employees was considered a legitimate focus of investigation. Sexual “deviants” were allegedly security risks because they could be easily seduced, blackmailed, or tempted to join subversive organizations, since they lacked the will and moral stamina to resist. A former employee of the State Department recalled his job interview, in which he was closely questioned about his sexual habits as well as those of his roommate. His interviewer explained that the information was necessary because homosexuals were easy prey for communists, who used seduction to gain secrets. Once he gained his security clearance and began work as a file clerk, he found huge files detailing the personal sexual histories of numerous individuals suspected of potential anti-American activity.<sup>7</sup>

Historian John D’Emilio articulated the dubious assumptions beneath this sexual side of anticommunism:

Allegedly slaves to their perverted desires, [homosexuals] stopped at nothing to gratify their sexual impulses. The satisfaction of animal needs dominated their lives until it atrophied all moral sense. Communists taught children to betray their parents; mannish women mocked the ideals of marriage and motherhood. Lacking toughness, the effete, overly educated male representatives of the Eastern establishment had lost China and Eastern Europe to the enemy. Weak-willed, pleasure-seeking homosexuals—“half-men”—feminized everything they touched and sapped the masculine vigor that had tamed a continent.<sup>8</sup>

With such ideas widely endorsed, individuals who chose personal paths that did not include marriage and parenthood risked being perceived as perverted, immoral, unpatriotic, and pathological. Neighbors shunned them as if they were dangerous; the government investigated them as security risks. Their chances of living free of stigma or harassment were slim. As a result of this “lavender scare,” hundreds of government employees and many more in other areas of work lost their jobs—far more than those who were fired for being “red.”

The persecution of homosexuals was the most blatant form of sexual paranoia linking “perversion” to national weakness, but it was not the only form. The

media focused attention on “sexual psychopaths,” who, like communists and homosexuals, might be lurking anywhere. The hysteria whipped up by the publicity surrounding an alleged wave of sex crimes reached grotesque proportions in the postwar years. The respondents to the Kelly Longitudinal Study (KLS) were vehement on this matter. A majority agreed, and one-fourth strongly agreed, that “sex crimes, such as rape and attacks on children, deserve more than mere imprisonment; such criminals ought to be publicly whipped or worse.”<sup>9</sup>

The specific targets of these crusades were usually men, but women were nevertheless implicated. As temptresses who seduced men into evil or as overprotective mothers guilty of “Momism,” women were blamed for men’s sexual transgressions that could lead them down the path to communism. Behind every subversive, it seemed, lurked a woman’s misplaced sexuality. Psychologists fueled these connections by asserting as scientific fact the theory that the causes of “abnormality” were rooted in early childhood. Mothers who neglected their children bred criminals; mothers who overindulged their sons turned them into passive, weak, and effeminate “perverts.” Sons bred in such homes, according to psychologists and psychoanalysts, would find it difficult to form “normal” relationships with women. Experts continued to give advice to mothers to help their sons “develop normally.” First on the list was to be a loving wife, rather than a domineering mother: “Which are you first of all, Wife or Mother?” asked *Parents Magazine*. A man is quoted as telling a friend, “But women all get that way after children come—too much mother, too little wife.” One young wife discovered her folly just in time and confessed, “My babies were becoming an obsession. . . . And as for Jim, I didn’t have any time or energy left for him. He’d become a part of the furniture.”<sup>10</sup>

Most theorists believed that women married to strong men who assumed their rightful economic and sexual dominance in the home would channel their sexual energy into marriage. These sexually fulfilled and submissive wives would lavish care on their children and sexual affection on their husbands. Sexually frustrated mothers whose husbands were not in command might turn their perverted desires toward their sons, thwarting the boys’ natural masculine development.<sup>11</sup> As political theorist Michael Rogin has shown, films, novels, and popular journals were filled with these themes. Philip Wylie, who gained fame in 1942 as the creator of the theory of Momism, wrote *Smoke across the Moon*, in which a sexually liberated left-wing woman encourages communist infiltration and destroys men. In 1954, Wylie wrote *Tomorrow*, in which he proposed civil defense as a protection against Momism. Wylie’s influence extended beyond his popular writings; he also became a special consultant to the Federal Civil Defense Administration.<sup>12</sup>

These sources of popular and official ideology insisted that male power was as necessary in the home as in the political realm, for the two were connected. Men in sexually fulfilling marriages would not be tempted by the degenerate seductions of the outside world that came from pornography, prostitution, “loose women,” or homosexuals. They would be able to stand up to the communists. They would be able to prevent the destruction of the nation’s moral fiber and its inevitable result: communist takeover from inside as well as outside the country. At the same time, women had to turn their energies toward the family in healthy ways. As long as they were subordinate to their husbands, sexually and otherwise, they would be contented and fulfilled wives devoting themselves to expert child rearing and professionalized homemaking. As loving, erotic mates, they would prevent their husbands from straying from the straight and narrow. And they would raise healthy children to be strong, vital citizens.<sup>13</sup>

The alternative scenario was frightening. The popular culture gave full play to the fears of sex and communism running amok. Millions of avid American readers made Mickey Spillane one of the most successful writers of the decade, with his anticommunist thriller mysteries. In novels like *Kiss Me Deadly* and *One Lonely Night*, foolish or evil women working for the communists try to steal atomic secrets from hapless men who are unable to resist their seduction. In *One Lonely Night*, the hero boasts of his delight in the grisly murders he commits, all in the name of destroying a communist plot to steal atomic secrets. After a night of carnage, the triumphant murderer gloats, “I shot them in cold blood and enjoyed every minute of it. I pumped slugs in the nastiest bunch of bastards you ever saw. . . . They were Commies. . . . Pretty soon what’s left of Russia and the slime that breeds there won’t be worth mentioning and I’m glad because I had a part in the killing. God, but it was fun! . . . They figured us all to be soft as horse manure and just as stupid.” The hero was not “soft as horse manure” because he was able to resist the advances of the female secret-snatchers. Never mind that he was a bloodthirsty murderer; he had the moral stamina to say no to seductive spy women. As he proclaimed with patriotic zeal, “I want to make sure this country has a secret that’s safe.” Of course, Mickey Spillane’s hero was a loner. He channeled his sexual energy into righteous violence. He had to save the nation from its own moral failings because other men were unable to contain their sexual passions. If they had been able to resist temptation and if the women had behaved themselves, there would have been no need for the hero’s bloody deeds.<sup>14</sup>

In the postwar years, these sexual-political assumptions did not seem far-fetched. Foreign policy itself rested on well-articulated assumptions about mas-

culine power—a power drawn from sexual potency as well as the moral strength to resist temptation. Consensus academics articulated the need for tough men of will in politics, using prose laden with metaphors of sexual prowess. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, wrote that postwar leaders in the “Vital Center” brought “a new virility into public life” in contrast to the “political sterility” of leftists and the “emasculated” ruling class. Softness would lead to subversion, “which is why the Doughface so often ends up as the willing accomplice of Communism.” Ideologues were “soft, not hard,” and displayed “the weakness of impotence,” compared to tough-minded American capitalists. Communism was “something secret, sweaty and furtive like nothing so much, in the phrase of one wise observer of modern Russia, as homosexuals in a boys’ school.”<sup>15</sup> Real Americans were not like that. Husbands, especially fathers, wore the badge of “family man” as a sign of virility and patriotism. There is no question that the social pressure to appear mature, responsible, “normal,” and patriotic contributed to the rush into marriage. Even gay men and lesbians used marriage as a cover during these years to escape stigma and persecution.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, when anticommunism began to destroy careers in Hollywood, a community notorious for its lack of attention to sexual propriety, the screen stars trumpeted their hometown as a paragon of family virtue. Film celebrity Ronald Reagan spoke enthusiastically about Hollywood’s high level of church attendance, low divorce rate, and child-centered homes. A Hollywood studio executive told a reporter in the midst of the red scare, “Why, I suddenly find myself beating my breast and proclaiming my patriotism and exclaiming that I love my wife and kids, of which I have four with a fifth on the way. I’m all loused up. I’m scared to death, and nobody can tell me it isn’t because I’m afraid of being investigated.”<sup>17</sup>

From the Senate to the FBI, from the anticommunists in Hollywood to Mickey Spillane, moral weakness was associated with sexual degeneracy, which allegedly led to communism. To avoid dire consequences, men as well as women had to contain their sexuality in marriage, where masculine men would be in control with sexually submissive, competent homemakers at their side. Strong families required two essential ingredients: sexual restraint outside marriage and traditional gender roles in marriage. The issue of sexuality was central to both.

The 1951 meeting of the Massachusetts Society for Social Health (MSSH), for example, featured a panel discussion of “Social Hygiene in Total Mobilization.” Bringing together physicians, clergy, social workers, military officers, and civil defense administrators, the Advisory Committee on Defense Activities of MSSH outlined several areas for discussion, including “promiscuity

and prostitution.” The MSSH saw the increasing expression of female sexuality, along with the entrance of women into the paid labor force, as two sides of the same dangerous coin. The criticism of women’s sexuality and employment was aimed at married as well as single women. These public health professionals argued that inside as well as outside the home, women who challenged traditional roles placed the security of the nation at risk. The experts warned that young women were drawn to public amusement areas that would lead them to sexual promiscuity, while the employment of married women led to “unsupervised homes where both parents are working.” The MSSH cited both trends as major causes for the decline of sexual morality among youths and a weakening of the nation’s moral fiber at a time when the country had to be strong.<sup>18</sup>

Despite such warnings, the vast number of employed married women did not leave the labor force. Anxiety continued to surround this issue, since an essential ingredient in winning the cold war was the rearing of strong and able offspring. The influx of women into jobs revived not only fears of sexual promiscuity and neglected children, but also the old eugenic cry of “race suicide.” Numerous observers expressed concern over an anticipated decline in the birthrate but failed to notice that the baby boom was well under way among all segments of the population. One scholar at Stanford University reported that the most “talented” Americans were reproducing at a very low rate.<sup>19</sup> Presumably, in the next generation, there would be a critical shortage of the scientists and experts needed to sustain American technical superiority and leadership in the world.

A writer in the *Ladies Home Journal* complained that the perceived failure of the educated to reproduce adequately

undoubtedly has to do with the so-called “emancipation” of women. Every field of life and activity is open to women today, and every year thousands of women leave our colleges and universities determined to make careers for themselves. They marry, but find reasons to postpone having children. Often Nature, as well as birth control measures, assist [sic] them in this. Women who lead very active lives, under conditions of nervous stress and strain, often do not conceive, and when they do, they miscarry. These women are violating their own biological natures; and for this they pay a heavy price. . . . The feminist movement was an attempt to break into “a man’s world”—and in the process, through envy, accepted to an alarming extent the values of men.<sup>20</sup>



The alleged dangers of race suicide, sexual promiscuity, and careerism might be avoided by adhering to family values. The containment of premarital sex was central to this effort. Although the ideal of chastity was certainly not new in these years, the behavior advocated for achieving it was. Since the 1930s, when moralists worried that delayed marriage would lead to an increase in premarital sex, many experts had argued for the removal of impediments to marriage. But they still urged restraint for the unmarried. Wartime, however, had caused such a massive unleashing of sex in all its forms that postwar experts realized that repression was no longer possible. They believed that premarital sexual experimentation was taking place to such an extent that calls for abstinence would be futile. The goal now was to teach young people already indulging in “petting” how to keep sex under control.<sup>21</sup>

But sex was already out of control. Alfred Kinsey, with meticulous scientific detail, shocked the nation in 1948 and 1953 with his documentation of widespread premarital intercourse, homosexual experiences, masturbation, and extramarital sex among American men and women.<sup>22</sup> As if to prove his point about the American interest in sex, the public made his tedious treatises instant best sellers. (Some accused Kinsey of aiding world communism because of his sex research.)<sup>23</sup> In the face of Kinsey’s evidence, efforts to achieve sexual repression gave way to new strategies for sexual containment. Marriage was considered the appropriate container for the unwieldy American libido.

Even the most outspoken advocates of healthy sexual expression, such as the noted physician Mary Calderone, advised young people to avoid premarital intercourse. According to Calderone and other sexual liberals, sex education would be the most effective means of channeling sex into marriage. (It is also worth noting that for her advocacy of sex education, Calderone, too, was labeled a “communist.”)<sup>24</sup> One method of containing sex was through elaborate courtship etiquette. Dating, a ritual that first emerged in the 1920s, had become an integral part of the youth culture by the 1950s. Before mid century, few articles on courtship appeared in the popular press. After that time, however, articles proliferated telling the dos and don’ts of dating. Experts repeatedly explained that it was up to young women to “draw the line” and exercise sexual restraint, thereby safeguarding the stability of their future families.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, public health professionals, social workers, and popular writers realized that appeals to moral rectitude and patriotism were not likely to eradicate sexuality among young people. They argued that the best way to contain sex was through early marriage. In the postwar years, writers of the prescriptive

literature began to advocate early marriage as the prerequisite for a healthy family and sexual life. As one professional explained:

Psychologists observe increasing difficulties of sexual abstinence for those who have not trained themselves in self-control and filled their lives with absorbing purposes and activities to the exclusion of sexual experience. . . . Marriage is better late than never. But early marriage gives more opportunity for happy comradeship, mutual development and physical adjustment, for having and training children, building a home, promoting family life as a community asset, and observing one's grandchildren start their careers.<sup>26</sup>

Most guidelines gave twenty-one as a healthy age for marriage, and public opinion polls indicated that most Americans agreed. Moreover, it was the woman's responsibility to achieve it. One typical guidebook, *Win Your Man and Keep Him*, stressed the need for young women to cultivate good looks, personality, and cheerful subservience. The authors advised, "If you are more than 23 years old . . . perhaps you have begun to wonder whether Mr. Right would ever come along for you. Your chances are still good; you can increase them appreciably by taking actions which this book advocates." Another text offered a similar rational, scientific formula: "A girl who reaches the middle twenties without a proposal ought to consider carefully whether she really wishes to remain single. If she does not, she should try to discover why marriage hasn't come her way, and perhaps take steps to make herself more interesting and attractive."<sup>27</sup>

The ideological connections among early marriage, sexual containment, and traditional gender roles merged in the context of the cold war. Experts called upon women to embrace domesticity in service to the nation, in the same spirit that they had come to the country's aid by taking wartime jobs. A team of sociologists called for a "new family type for the space age." Women's domestic roles needed to be infused with a sense of national purpose. It was not the first time that motherhood provided the female version of civic virtue. Indeed, as historian Linda Kerber has shown, ever since the era of the American Revolution, the nation's political ideology has held a special place for women as the nurturers and educators of future citizens. This notion of republican motherhood held unique power in the nineteenth century, when women were not allowed to vote but were encouraged to exercise their civic responsibility through enlightened motherhood.<sup>28</sup>

Although at first glance the "new" family type looked like the "old" traditional home with mother as moral guardian, the "space age" mother needed to

go beyond inherited wisdom by cultivating professional skills to meet the challenges of the modern era. In addition, unlike Victorian mothers, who were expected to be reluctant sexual partners who tolerated sex for reproduction only, wives in the postwar era were recognized as sexual enthusiasts whose insistence on conjugal satisfaction would contribute to erotically charged marriages. Sexual containment—unlike sexual repression—would enhance family togetherness, which would keep both men and women happy at home and would, in turn, foster wholesome child rearing.

In the years after World War II, female domesticity took a new form to fit the cold war. In addition to sexual recreation, women's homemaking duties would also be purposeful. One new requirement for the professional homemaker was expertise in dealing with the possibility of nuclear war. This new function might fuse women's domestic role to the larger national purpose, as had occurred during the war. The Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA), created by President Harry Truman in 1950, was actively involved in developing the concept of professionalized homemaking for the atomic age.

By 1950, the immediate postwar call for international control of the bomb had given way to advocacy of civil defense planning. Now that Russia had the bomb, atomic war could occur "whenever the fourteen evil men in Moscow decide to have it break out," warned the governor of New York.<sup>29</sup> Preparedness was now the key to survival in the nuclear age. The FCDA coordinated the nation's efforts in this regard. Several women, including Jean Wood Fuller and Katherine Graham Howard, held key positions in this agency. Their task was to help formulate and promote the role of American women in civil defense.<sup>30</sup>

Since broad-based governmental programs for evacuation of the population and for public shelters were quickly abandoned as impractical, the focus of the FCDA centered on local and private efforts. Fuller, director of women's activities, played an important role in these civil defense plans, for she was responsible for educational programs to be implemented in localities across the country. Born in Los Angeles, Fuller had been in the retail trades in Beverly Hills prior to World War II. During the war, she served in the Red Cross and the Home Services Corps, and from 1950 to 1954, she was president of the California Federation of Republican Women.

Fuller claimed that women had special skills and qualities that enabled them to cope with atomic war. Her stance fit the increasingly widespread belief that atomic warfare could be waged and survived. During the 1955 test of the atomic bomb in the Nevada desert, Fuller served, as she put it, as a "female guinea pig" in the trench thirty-five hundred yards from ground zero. After the blast, the Los

Angeles *Times* quoted her as saying it was “terrific, interesting and exciting. . . . My experience this morning shows conclusively that women can stand the shock and strain of an atomic explosion just as well as men. . . . It also proved that with the proper precautions, entire communities can survive an atomic bombing.” Glowing from the experience, she spoke of “the beauty of [the mushroom cloud] . . . the colors and just before dawn you could get a sort of lovely background.”<sup>31</sup>

Fuller’s observation of the blast led her to develop a program of “home protection and safety.” With chilling cheerfulness, she called for “positive action” to overcome anxiety about the new age. She was critical of women’s groups who opposed the tests, such as the American Association of University Women, and urged women to draw on their unique domestic expertise to find new roles suited to the cold war. Home nursing, including first aid, was one important area; in the event of a nuclear attack, well-trained women would be equipped to tend to injured family members. Another skill to cultivate was the power of persuasion. Fuller urged women to convince public officials to become interested in civil defense by approaching them “in your own feminine way—but never be belligerent, please.” She appealed to rural as well as urban housewives, particularly to church women: “It’s second nature for them to put on large dinners. Aren’t they just perfect naturals for our mass feeding groups?” Along with learning how to feed the survivors of a nuclear attack, women had to teach the children as well: “Civil defense training is almost akin to religious training. . . . We must teach our children protection. . . . A mother must calm the fears of her child. Make a game out of it: Playing Civil Defense.”<sup>32</sup>

One of Fuller’s most ardent campaigns was for women to prepare their homes for a nuclear attack. Radiation, she claimed, was not so dangerous as it used to be. “Our chances of living through the worst that the enemy can do are greater than his. . . . We must have a strong civil defense program . . . to help us get up off the floor after a surprise attack, and fight back and win.”<sup>33</sup> Along with other civil defense experts, Fuller devised several campaigns that drew on women’s traditional domestic functions to equip them for a nuclear emergency.

One of the most extensively publicized campaigns was “Grandma’s Pantry”—the home bomb shelter. With the help of the National Grocer’s Association, several pharmaceutical houses, and the American National Dietetic Association, Fuller drew up guidelines for withstanding a nuclear holocaust. The campaign appealed to time-honored values and rested on conservatism and nostalgia. Evoking memories of a simpler past, the official government brochure contained the slogan “Grandma’s pantry was always ready. She was ready when

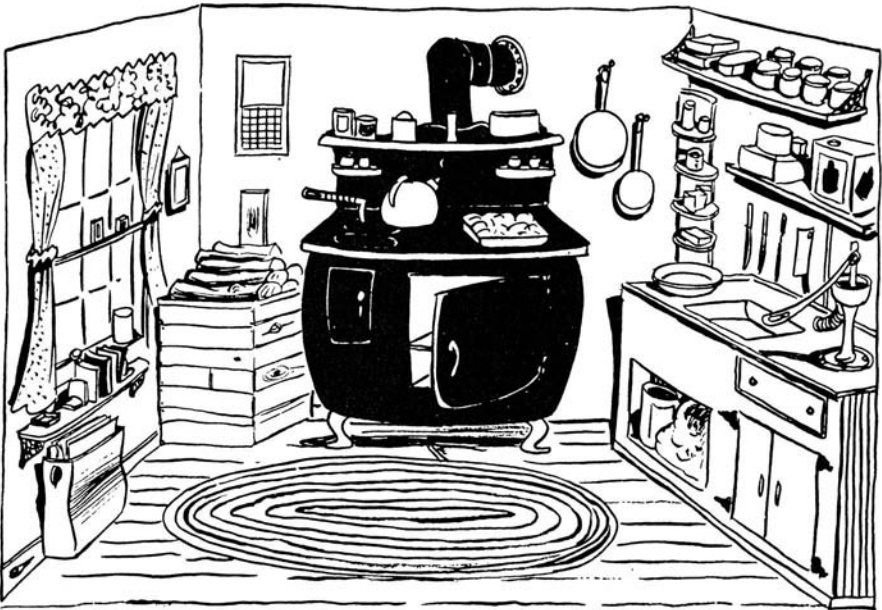
the preacher came on Sunday or she was ready when the relatives arrived from Nebraska. Grandma's Pantry was ready—Is Your Pantry Ready in Event of Emergency?" (see Figure 9). The brochure featured a picture of an old-fashioned and well-supplied kitchen and included a long list of foods, canned goods, medical supplies, and other helpful items, such as first aid kits, soap, candles, buckets, and pet foods. It taught women to rotate canned goods regularly, change bottled water every three months, wrap items stored in glass for protection, and concluded, "With a well-stocked pantry you can be just as self-sufficient as Grandma was. Add a first aid kit, flashlight, and a portable radio to this supply, and you will have taken the first important step in family preparedness."<sup>34</sup>

Many widely publicized disaster feeding drills also took place around the country. Women were instructed how to cook with makeshift utensils, "how to use this and that to make do with bricks and rubble and grates that you might find so that you could cook." They were assured that if they learned first aid, home nursing, firefighting, and how to supply a bomb shelter, they need have no fear of an atomic attack. Fuller taught women how to construct simple shelters in their basements from a large board leaning against a wall. To underscore the importance of this project, she showed detailed photographs of the atomic test in Nevada that depicted child-sized mannequins under shelters still standing after the blast, while those outside the lean-tos were maimed.<sup>35</sup>

A major goal of these civil defense strategies was to infuse the traditional role of women with new meaning and importance, which would help fortify the home as a place of security amid the cold war. Even in the ultimate chaos of an atomic attack, appropriate gender roles would need to prevail. A 1950 civil defense plan put men in charge of such duties as firefighting, rescue work, street clearing, and rebuilding, while women were to attend to child care, hospital work, social work, and emergency feeding.<sup>36</sup>

It is not known how many people equipped their basements according to the plan of "grandma's pantry," but it is known that by the 1950s, civil defense strategies focused on the home had become a major means of simultaneously calming the nation's atomic fears while reinforcing hostility toward the Soviet Union. Experts in nearly every field, from education to medicine, contributed their advice. Even schoolchildren were taught how to protect themselves in case of a surprise attack; teachers would command, "Drop," and children would duck under their desks, close their eyes to avoid blindness from the flash, and clasp their hands around their heads to keep their skulls intact. Once the "all clear" sounded, these children would run home to join their parents in basement fallout shelters. Simple measures such as these were attempts to reassure the public

## GRANDMA'S PANTRY WAS READY



### Is Your "Pantry" Ready in Event of Emergency?

FIGURE 9 The Federal Civil Defense Administration evoked comforting images of traditional domesticity in its campaign for home bomb shelters, "Grandma's Pantry." (*Federal Civil Defense Administration.*)

that they could protect themselves against nuclear annihilation. Yet, at the same time, they intensified the nation's consciousness of the imminence of nuclear war, raising the specter of sudden carnage. In virtually all the civil defense publicity, safety was represented in the form of the family.<sup>37</sup>

Fuller and the civil defense establishment were not the only ones preoccupied with family bomb shelters. Contractors commercialized the idea by creating a variety of styles and sizes to fit the tastes of consumers, from a "\$13.50 foxhole shelter" to a "\$5,000 deluxe 'suite' with telephone, escape hatches, bunks, toilets, and geiger counter."<sup>38</sup> Moments of increased tension in the cold war, such as the Cuban missile crisis, sparked flurries of shelter construction. Although relatively few Americans actually built them, private shelters symbolized family security and togetherness in the face of a frightening world. Whether con-

structed of concrete or created out of well-stocked basements, family shelters contributed to homeowners' pride and became "an important source of reassurance . . . with considerable symbolic value as an anxiety-reducing feature of the environment," argued a Yale psychologist in a RAND Corporation study.<sup>39</sup> Popular magazines poured out numerous articles on the uses of home bomb shelters during peace as well as war. Peacetime uses for the shelters reinforced women's roles as homemakers. As one woman said of her new shelter, "It will make a wonderful place for the kids to play in. And it will be a good storehouse, too. I do a lot of canning and bottling, you know." Other promoters offered shelters to the "harried housewife," who would be able to send her children off to play in sheltered safety.<sup>40</sup>

Rural areas also offered the combined appeals of escape from the threat of nuclear attack and a retreat into a vision of old-fashioned family life—much like Grandma's Pantry. In 1950, the *New York Times* reported that a boom in rural real estate was directly linked to civil defense concerns. While government-sponsored dispersal plans never achieved widespread support, individual families turned to country life for protection. Numerous realtors across the country noted that rural sales had increased dramatically, in some places as much as 100 percent, and that buyers frequently wanted to be far from a city—at least fifty miles from any likely nuclear target. Brokers advertised "country properties for this Atomic Age" and described them as "protected country settings" and "retreats." Buyers came from all socioeconomic levels and ranged from those who placed small down payments on abandoned farms to wealthy purchasers of country estates.<sup>41</sup>

In these ways, civil defense merged with widespread popular wishes for family security. Frequently, marriage itself symbolized a refuge against danger. One of the most explicit symbolic representations of this fusion was the *Life* magazine story mentioned in the Introduction, which featured a couple who descended into their own new bomb shelter just after their wedding. With powerful associations of family togetherness as the first positive step toward survival in the atomic age, *Life* noted that the sheltered honeymoon was purposeful: "Mr. and Mrs. Melvin Minonson this month subjected their budding marriage to the strain of 14 days (the crucial period of fallout danger) of unbroken togetherness. . . . When they emerged last week the Minonsons were in fine spirits and the stunt had produced some useful evidence on underground survival."<sup>42</sup>

Ultimately, bomb shelters were not nearly as widespread as the particular form of family life they symbolically contained. Americans did, however, opt for early marriage, traditional gender roles, domesticated sexuality, and a home life

centered on security. Even the ranch-style suburban houses that proliferated across the country seemed to evoke protection. As historian Clifford Edward Clark, Jr., showed, low-pitched roofs, attached carports, and fences surrounding yards gave these structures “a sheltered look. . . . [The] 1950s design standards conceived of the natural world in a simplified and controlled way that eliminated anything that was wild or irregular.” Neither the Victorian homes of the nineteenth century, with their bold, stately, and public facades, nor the informal bungalows of the early twentieth century exuded this sense of isolation, privacy, and containment.<sup>43</sup>

In keeping with these images, much of the postwar social science literature connected the functions of the family directly to the cold war. In one study funded by the Ford Foundation, two Harvard sociologists examined sixty thousand “successful American families” to determine what made them successful. Success was defined as the ability to keep children in school through high school. The authors explained the reason for this concern as follows:

Early in January, 1957, Russia exploded an atomic bomb, and American scientists monitored its fallout of fission products. Non-stop simulated bomber flights in the upper atmosphere were now reported by the U.S. as traveling around the world in about forty-five hours. Trouble arose in the Middle East. Hungary broke into revolution. Then came *Sputnik*, space vehicles, ICBM's and crash programs for training more scientists. The world is like a volcano that breaks out repeatedly. . . . The world approaches this critical period with a grave disruption of the family system. . . . The new age demands a stronger, more resolute and better equipped individual. . . . To produce such persons will demand a reorganization of the present family system and the building of one that is stronger emotionally and morally.<sup>44</sup>

The heart of these professionals' concern was not just the cold war, but “grave disruption of the family system.” The key to successful families, they concluded, was stable homes in which men and women adhered to traditional gender roles. Parents should set good examples for their children, stay together and not divorce, and associate with like-minded families that shared common values and moral principles. In keeping with the American tradition, it was up to women to achieve successful families. If women fulfilled their domestic roles, as adapted to the atomic age, they would rear children who would avoid juvenile delinquency (and homosexuality), stay in school, and become future scientists and experts to defeat the Russians in the cold war.



In this vision of the atomic age family, women were the focus of concern. It was important to recognize their increasing sexual and economic emancipation, but to channel those energies into the family. Outside the home (or even inside the home without a strong male authority), they would become a dangerous, destructive force. This message was overtly expressed in the literature surrounding the cold war, civil defense, and the family. So pervasive and lasting was the connection between taming fears of the atomic age and taming women that as late as 1972, a civil defense pamphlet personified dangerous radioactive rays as sexy women. To explain the dangers of fallout, the authors wrote, "Radioactivity is also energy—but this time the rays come invisibly; alpha, beta, and gamma rays cause varying degrees of silent damage. Alpha's cannot penetrate, but can irritate the skin; betas cause body burns; and gammas can go right through you—and thus damage cells, which can make you ill, or kill you. Like energy from the sun, these rays are potentially both harmful and helpful."<sup>45</sup>

Beside this explanation was a drawing of the three types of rays, personified as large-breasted bathing beauties in seductive poses (see Figure 10). Other illustrations in the pamphlet indicated how to find safety by avoiding and containing

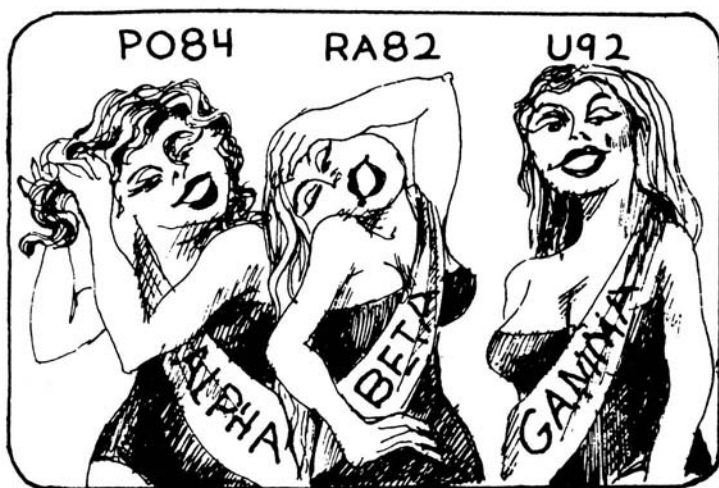


FIGURE 10 This illustration from a civil defense pamphlet personifies the three deadly rays of radiation. The pamphlet explained that "these rays are potentially both harmful and helpful," like the sexy women who represent them. (*Your Chance to Live*, Defense Civil Preparedness Agency.)

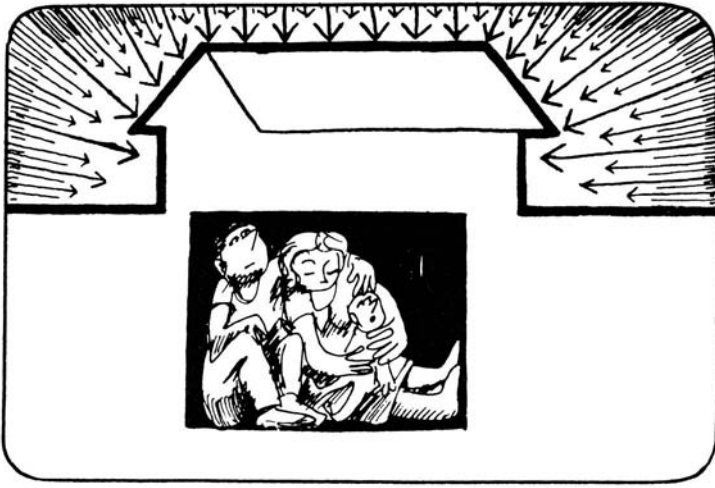


FIGURE 11 Domesticity represents the safest haven in the face of the dangers of the atomic age. Here Mom, Dad, and Baby huddle in coziness as chaos reigns outside. (*Your Chance to Live*, Defense Civil Preparedness Agency.)

these dangers: Mom, dad, and baby huddled together in a home bomb shelter as chaos reigns above, and a detailed drawing of a well-equipped shelter with “Home Sweet Home” tacked on the wall (see Figures 11 and 12). These illustrations made explicit the message that sexually liberated women, like the alpha, gamma, and beta rays, were potentially destructive creatures who might be tamed and domesticated for the benefit of society. Even though the fervor of the cold war had waned considerably by 1972, the images in these illustrations are powerful testimony to the symbolic connections between the fears of atomic power, sex, and women out of control.

These images also surfaced in the wider culture. During these years a slang term for a sexy woman outside the home was a *bombshell*. (Other terms connoting the devastating power of female sexuality included a *knockout* and a “dynamite” woman.) The use of the term *bombshell* to describe a woman first emerged during the 1930s, with the increasing recognition of female sexuality as powerful and explosive. During World War II, pilots named their bombers after their sweethearts and decorated their planes with erotic portraits. The wartime emergency, calling for fashion adaptations that would conserve fabric, gave rise to the two-piece bathing suit, which also appeared dangerous. The *Wall Street Journal* noted ominously that “the saving has been effected in the region of the



FIGURE 12 “Home Sweet Home” inside a bomb shelter. Note the reassuring effects: the sign on the wall, the first aid kit, consumer goods, and the inexplicably lit lightbulb. (*Your Chance to Live*, Defense Civil Preparedness Agency.)

midriff. . . . The difficulties and dangers of the situation are obvious.”<sup>46</sup> In the postwar era, female sexuality continued to represent a destructive and disruptive force. A photograph of Hollywood sex symbol Rita Hayworth was actually attached to the hydrogen bomb dropped on the Bikini Islands. The island itself provided the name for the abbreviated swimsuit the female “bombshells” would wear. The designer of the revealing suit chose the name *bikini* four days after the bomb was dropped to suggest the swimwear’s explosive potential.<sup>47</sup>

Similar images infused the popular culture. The words of the 1954 recording by Bill Haley and His Comets, “Thirteen Women (and Only One Man in Town),” quoted at the beginning of this chapter, express the sexual fantasy of a young man dreaming of being the sole male survivor of an H-bomb explosion, with thirteen women to do his bidding. Filled with sexual puns and double entendres typical of rhythm-and-blues lyrics, the song expresses its eroticism in terms of the women’s domestic subservience. In keeping with visions of the modern home, the women make his food and clothes, provide consumer goods, and entertain him with leisure pursuits such as dancing. And of course, there is the implicit suggestion of sexual adventures with this “lively pack” of bombshells—a vision that would no doubt cause Charles Walter Clarke and his colleagues in the American Social Hygiene Association to shudder. Yet, like other potentially explosive

forces in postwar America, the female bombshell could be “harnessed for peace” within the home. It was widely believed during these years that atomic energy could foster a better lifestyle through nuclear power, which would be achieved by taming the atom.<sup>48</sup> Female sexuality could also be contained and domesticated. Knockouts and bombshells could be tamed, after all, into harmless *chicks*, *kittens*, and the most famous sexual pet of them all, the Playboy bunny.

Symbols of sexual containment proliferated during these years. Even the fashions reflected this image. Gone was the look of boyish freedom that characterized the flapper of the 1920s and the shoulder-padded styles evoking strength of the 1930s and early 1940s. In the late 1940s and 1950s, quasi-Victorian long, wide skirts, crinolines, and frills were back, along with exaggerated bust lines and curves that created the aura of untouchable eroticism. Female sexuality was, once again, contained in stays and girdles that pinched waists and padded brassieres that made women appear to have large breasts. But the body itself was protected in a fortress of undergarments, warding off sexual contact but promising erotic excitement in the marital bed. According to a 1947 poll, women did not like this style but said they would wear it anyway.<sup>49</sup>

At home, sexuality could be safely unleashed by both men and women, where it would provide a positive force to enhance family life. It is no wonder, then, that professionals attempted to promote a vision of the family that would contain the social, sexual, and political dangers of the day and would root the revitalized home in time-honored traditional values. Although conditions had irreversibly changed, Americans refused to abandon the values of the past. So they contained the new realities within the boundaries of old structures, such as Grandma’s Pantry. For policymakers concerned with domestic as well as diplomatic issues, containment was the order of the day. Subversives at home, Communist aggressors abroad, atomic energy, sexuality, the bomb, and the “bombshell” all had to be “harnessed for peace.”

Containment at home offered the possibility that the modern family would tame fears of atomic holocaust and tame women as well. With their new jobs and recently acknowledged sexuality, emancipated women outside the home might unleash the very forces that would result in a collapse of the one institution that seemed to offer protection: the home. For women, the rewards offered by marriage, compared to the limited opportunities in the public world, made the homemaker role an appealing choice. So women donned their domestic harnesses. But in their efforts to live according to the codes of domestic containment, they were bound to encounter difficulty. Only later did they discover how uncomfortable those harnesses could be.