

# Duck and Cover

By Jake Hughes

Throughout the autumn of 1951, schoolchildren in the New York City borough of Queens became the stars of a nine minute motion picture designed to explore a new and terrifying subject. As cameras rolled, educators stood before classrooms of wide-eyed students and explained, with the aid of an illustrated turtle, how to protect oneself from the burning flash of an enemy atomic bomb. One year prior, President Harry Truman had created the Federal Civil Defense Administration (F.C.D.A.), the United States' first government agency devoted entirely to civilian emergency preparedness.<sup>1</sup> Among the F.C.D.A.'s earliest initiatives was a film campaign highlighting a number of dangers facing the American public. Though these initial government sponsored films would cover multiple topics, the majority of them focused on the burgeoning threat of atomic warfare. Archer Productions, a Manhattan-based advertising firm, submitted the winning bid to produce a film on the topic of civil defense in schools and in January of 1952 the fruit of their labor premiered under the title "Duck and Cover."<sup>2</sup>

The presentation of "Duck and Cover"'s content is formatted specifically for a school-aged audience. This is most evident in the opening scene, which introduces the iconic cartoon character of Bert the Turtle. While a catchy jingle encourages children to mimic his actions, Bert, who wears an air-raid warden's tin helmet, retreats into his shell any time danger threatens. "Duck and Cover" simplifies the harmful effects of an atom bomb so that its young viewers might understand the ways it could hurt or kill them. The blast and shockwave are depicted as a strong wind capable of knocking a person over if caught unprepared. Its thermal heat and radiation are likened to a terrible sunburn. To demonstrate, a fast-paced animated sequence shows a house caving in from an atom bomb's offscreen detonation. Tree limbs and wood splinters whirl across a devastated landscape, but in the center of the frame, Bert sits, anchored and unmoving in his shell. Returning to a live action classroom, students emulate Bert, crouching beneath their desks and covering their heads. The film shows this action over and over again, seeking to instruct children that, in the event of a surprise atomic attack, they must reflexively curl into a protective position without panic or hesitation.

The film also stresses the importance of obeying all authority figures. In the classroom, this is the teacher, who calmly answers all questions about the atomic bomb with straightforward facts. At home, parents



*Bert the Turtle urged Cold War era schoolchildren to duck and cover.*

take charge by preparing a safe and well-stocked area to seek refuge in. "Duck and Cover" makes a point, however, of presenting scenarios where parents and teachers are likely to be absent, prompting children to look elsewhere for help in times of emergency. A teenaged girl is shown walking to school when an air-raid siren begins to wail. With the narrator's encouragement, she seeks out an "older person" who quickly guides her to a public shelter. In hallways and on the playground, older kids are expected to take the lead, and several are seen demonstrating how to properly duck and cover for their peers. During a subsequent scene, a young boy bikes to his Cub Scout meeting. Confronted with an atomic flash, he dives against a brick wall and remains there until helped up by a civil defense worker. While the boy dusts himself off, the narrator admonishes "we must obey the civil defense worker!"

"Duck and Cover" is only one entry in the large sub-genre of civil defense oriented motion pictures, many of which offer far more graphic and memorable content. How, then, did this film become synonymous with the culture of Communist paranoia and morbid fatalism so often associated with the height of Cold War America? The answer appears to lie in its target audience. The schoolchildren who would view the film in classrooms across the United States, and who would ultimately practice its signature maneuver in air-raid drills, saw their formative years burdened by the possibility of human extinction in the sudden flash of an enemy bomb even though very little media on the subject was meant to be absorbed by their age group. "Duck and Cover" was marketed as the first children's film to address the threat of an atomic attack. It wasn't. That honor belongs to Atomic Alert, released seven months prior by Encyclopedia Britannica films.<sup>3</sup>

These productions were exceptions, however, and the fact remains that very few civil defense films were created with the intention of showing them to children.

Most Cold War civil defense productions were made with the expectation they would be viewed by older audiences. "Our Cities Must Fight," released by Archer Productions alongside "Duck and Cover" in January of 1952, provides an excellent example of how many such films were presented and received. Written to convince factory workers and other essential personnel to remain in target cities and keep America's war industries running during an atomic exchange, that film's message was clearly meant to be seen and acted upon by a different generation of viewers. Namely, the parents and grandparents of the children watching "Duck and Cover." As these earlier generations aged and passed away, so too did the memories of the civil defense films designed for them. "Our Cities Must Fight," and many of its contemporaries, faded into obscurity. As the years progressed, however, and Cold War tensions relaxed, "Duck and Cover" grew into a curious relic of the past. To many of its original viewers, it remained a darkly comic reminder of the strange ways in which the American government tried to shape their childhood.

The lasting legacy achieved by "Duck and Cover" is all the more remarkable given its official fate at the hands of American policymakers. Beginning in 1955, the Federal Civil Defense Administration issued an annual statistical report. In addition to providing detailed accounts of projects and expenditures, these lengthy documents also included a complete list of all motion pictures available for rent or purchase from the agency. The inaugural statistical report, released in June of 1955, does not list "Duck and Cover" among the films available from the F.C.D.A. Furthermore, it cannot be found on a secondary list of films which, though once available, were pulled from circulation and vaguely labeled "under revision."<sup>4</sup>

The 1956 statistical report also does not offer "Duck and Cover" as an available title and further explains "some of the earlier released films have been withdrawn because changing concepts and new weapons have made them obsolete."<sup>5</sup> In 1957, the final year for both the annual statistical reports and the F.C.D.A. (it would merge with another agency in the summer of 1958), a list of films officially declared obsolete was issued which included "Duck and Cover," "Our Cities Must Fight," and many other initial government sponsored productions. Each following year, the list of obsolete films would grow

larger and by 1959, all government copies of obsolete films were recalled and owners of private copies were encouraged to cease screenings.<sup>6</sup>

Despite all of the fanfare surrounding the creation of "Duck and Cover," the film appears to have been pulled from circulation just three and half years after its release and declared obsolete by mid-1957. It is important to note, however, that while the American government may have washed its hands of the advice offered in "Duck and Cover," this announcement was made in newsletters and statistical reports with circulations limited to high ranking civil defense officials. The vast majority of Americans no doubt remained unaware that the practice of crouching beneath a desk was no longer considered a reliable safety measure in the event of an enemy atomic attack. Furthermore, the withdrawal, and subsequent recall, of the film did not apply to parties who purchased their own print. Indeed, testimony abounds on the internet and elsewhere from people who claim to have viewed "Duck and Cover" in schools, in churches, and in civic meetings in the 1960's, 70's, and even during the brief resurgence of atomic civil defense in the early 1980's. While such tales may be of questionable accuracy and veracity, they stand as a testament to the cultural impact that a turtle with a tin helmet, a jingle, and nine minutes of screen time left on a generation.

<sup>1</sup> Exec. Order No. 10186, 15 C.F.R. 8557 (1950). Print.

<sup>2</sup> "New Film to Help in Bomb Training: 'Duck and Cover' to be Shown to School Children Here in Self-Protection Courses." The New York Times, January 25, 1952.

<sup>3</sup> "Atomic Alert: School, Home, Street." The Education Screen (Jan. 1951): 148.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1955 Annual Statistical Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1955 (p. 34).

<sup>5</sup> Federal Civil Defense Administration, 1956 Annual Statistical Report, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956 (p. 98).

<sup>6</sup> Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization, Motion Pictures on Civil Defense. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959 (p. 15-16).

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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