

The House in the Middle

By Kelly Chisholm

The crystallization and escalation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union influenced both the plots and the thematic elements of Hollywood films as the 1950s wore on, but it also directly inspired a whole genre: the government-sponsored civil defense film. Governments around the world had made propaganda and informational films for their citizens from the silent era on; for instance, during the two world wars, films produced by different countries on opposite sides painted very different pictures of how the war was proceeding.

But in 1950, a new organization within the U.S. government was formed that would become the quintessential producer of informational films for the rest of the decade: the Federal Civil Defense Administration. The FCDA was tasked with ensuring the American public was prepared in the event of an attack on American soil, and they made many films addressing what was at the forefront of the public's concern: the atomic bomb. Atomic testing was very publicly proceeding by both the U.S. and Soviet governments, and the world had already glimpsed the devastation wrought by the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

By 1954, the FCDA had made many films preparing the public for what to do in the event of an attack ("Duck and Cover" is one of the most famous and was named to the National Film Registry); but the FCDA had also begun collaborating with corporations and industry organizations who wanted to link their products to protecting the American public. In the fall of 1953, footage captured during a detonation at the Nevada Test Site revealed that painted lumber and tidy houses were marginally less likely to catch fire during an atomic blast. The FCDA released a short, black-and-white film soon after the test footage had aired on television, which simply suggested that having a clean and well-kept house may help protect you, called "The House in the Middle." I recently discovered this disconcertingly straightforward film in a collection at the Library of Congress; the test footage is brief, but it does show that the less cluttered a house and yard, the less likely it is to be engulfed in flames during an atomic blast—and as the film addresses, these are also just basic guidelines for avoiding fire hazards in a home.



A frame enlargement from the film demonstrates the effects of a nuclear explosion on a model of a house. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.

The next year, that same test footage appeared in a longer, color film of the same name, produced for the FCDA but sponsored by the National Clean Up-Paint Up-Fix Up Bureau, which was a branch of the National Paint, Varnish and Lacquer Association. The sponsorship behind the film greatly influenced the content of the film, which went to great lengths to show how a properly painted and tidy house would withstand an atomic blast. In this version, which was much more widely seen than the first, there is more footage of "typical" American neighborhoods, more ominous narration, and more footage from the atomic testing. From the very start of the film, with a countdown to an atomic blast, the film is attempting to frighten its audience into following its guidance.

One of the striking elements of the film is the judgmental narration; while you often find this tone of narration in instructional films of the time, the script seems very aggressive, specifically when it mentions early on that the fence with dry grass and litter strewn around it has been created to "simulate conditions you've seen in too many alleys and backyards—in slum areas." This film has an agenda, and it is starting to impart that agenda by reminding you what your neighborhood is supposed to look like. Once it shows that these poorly kept fences will cause fires and devastation, the film moves onto something more personal: your living room. It shows one house set up with "all the earmarks of untidy housekeeping", which apparently are having a shirt hung up on a hook and newspapers on a table. The

other, “tidy” house is set up with nothing out on any tables and furniture covered in plastic. So, in other words, like a house that no one lives in. This once again reads as an indictment of class level – your neighborhood is a slum if it has yards with dry grass and things piled up by fences, and your house is untidy if you don’t have enough room to spread your furniture and belongings out sparingly across many rooms. The test footage for these houses unfolds, and of course, the untidy house is almost immediately engulfed in flame, while the tidy house... well, the tidy house looks fine for a moment, and then the film cuts away, and the next time we see it is after the fire has been put out. It does seem to have survived the blast better, and indeed there were simply fewer flammable items in the room in this tidy house. But it also caught fire. And we didn’t get to see how long it burned before the fire was extinguished compared to the untidy house next door. We’ll just take their word for it.

The final test footage sequence is finally building toward the goals of the film’s sponsor: to sell more house paint. The test footage does indeed show that the painted house withstands the atomic blast while the unpainted houses burn down, but the film also seems a little unclear as to why this simple upkeep made such a difference or if the interior of the house burned at all. But no matter, the point is that having a clean and tidy white house with a white picket fence is the way to survive an atomic blast. Enlist your children to clean up your towns and neighborhoods, put a fresh coat of paint over everything, and America will survive anything that comes its way.

“The House in the Middle,” along with “Duck and Cover”, remains one of the most egregious examples of both exploiting and calming the fears of the American people during the Cold War, which to those in the early- to mid-1950s was a new and fundamentally disturbing situation. It is essential that we, as a culture, remember how fear can grip our country and how there will always be those around willing to calm, and maybe also exploit, that fear however they can. Asking people to confront their fragility and mortality with honesty has never been easy, and this film is a telling reminder that it has always been easier to give people something concrete to do, even if that thing is pointless, than ask them to accept uncertainty.

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The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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