Coping with the Cold War: Civil Defense in Austin, Texas, 1961-62

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"Peace through Preparedness" was the theme of National Civil Defense Day, December 7, 1960 — the nineteenth anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The day called attention to the nation's civil defense system, which the Texas Defense Digest described as "a vital part of national security, a deterrent to war, and assurance of personal as well as national survival if nuclear war comes." Fortunately, fallout shelter construction, an important aspect of civil defense, "is gaining real impetus, and should be accelerated." In Texas, Governor Price Daniel encouraged that acceleration by declaring Sunday, December 4, "Spiritual Civil Defense Day."

Despite all the urging, the confident pronouncements, and several international crises that seemed to bring the world to the brink of nuclear war, by the next autumn ninety-three percent of the respondents to a Gallup poll had done nothing to protect themselves from a nuclear attack. Residents of Austin, Texas, had done even less. Only seventeen of the 500 informants in a government survey in that city owned home fallout shelters in the fall of 1961. Six months later another survey revealed that Austin had public shelter for only sixteen percent of its population.

Obviously, the extent to which Austinites, Texans, or Americans were secure from nuclear attack is clear. They were not. More important, however, are the reasons why a small minority of Americans did succumb to the admonishments of federal and local authorities. The civil defense experience in Austin, a city about which the director of the Southwest Civil Defense Region wrote, "he knew of no other major city in the United States with better readiness plans," may help explain their behavior.

The sudden construction of the Berlin Wall and a new wave of nuclear tests by the Soviets sparked the 1961-62 civil defense mania. In his July 25, 1961, television speech, President John F. Kennedy responded to these new examples of Communist aggression by asking for $3.25 billion to increase American armed forces at home and overseas. In addition, Kennedy stressed the gravity of the world situation by announcing his request for an additional $207,000,000 in civil defense appropriations. It was, he said, the "sober responsibility" of the federal government to recognize "the possibilities of nuclear war in the missile age." The government would establish public fallout shelters in existing buildings and stock them, upgrade warning systems, and perform other civil defense tasks, while private citizens were urged to do everything they could to insure their

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families safety. The result was what Office of Civilian and Defense Mobilization director Frank B. Ellis called a "revival for survival."5

Despite the administration’s emphasis on community shelters, several months passed before any concrete plans were made, and in the interim family fallout shelters became the rage. Federal, state, and local civil defense organizations distributed literature on how to survive fallout and how to build fallout shelters; private companies quickly brought out custom-made shelters and other survival paraphernalia; and national magazines ran cover stories and special issues supporting or condemning the civil defense enthusiasm. Life magazine predicted that with the proper precautions, up to ninety-seven percent of all Americans could survive a nuclear attack, while Popular Mechanics blithely announced that in the post-nuclear war United States "it would be a busy life for awhile," but that "comeback would be no worse than the job that faced our forefathers in carving this nation out of the wilderness." The Nation launched the most virulent attack against the civil defense program; in November 1961, an article accused the government of using "American civilian lives as counters in the game of credibility," which was the key to nuclear strategy, according to experts such as Herman Kahn. "Credibility," the article exclaimed, "has become what 'faith' and 'dogma' were for the Spanish Inquisition, justifying anything, including holding hostage not only the enemy's population, but our own as well."6

The debate raged on through the winter and early spring of 1962, but, in spite of all the noise, little was done. A Gallup poll late in 1961 found that only twelve percent of the population planned to make "any changes" in their homes to protect them from nuclear attack, and the White House allowed the House of Representatives to cut its 1963 request for $695 million in civil defense funds to $80.5 million. By December 1962, The New Republic could ask, "Where's Civil Defense Now?"7

Austin, like the rest of America, experienced a civil defense mania that surged into 1962 and then dwindled to indifference. Symbolically, less than a week after President Kennedy's Berlin address a lurid advertisement for the Living Shelter Company appeared in the Austin American. Emblazoned across a picture of a rising mushroom cloud were the words "Life or Death — It's Up to You!" The ad went on to quote Kennedy's assertion that it was every American's "sober responsibility" to "recognize the possibilities of nuclear war," which implied, of course, that the responsibility could be fulfilled by buying a Living Shelter. One could be purchased with no down payment and with the aid of a Farm and Home Administration loan; the ad suggested that a shelter could serve as a play room, office, or music room between nuclear attacks. Austin's civil defense director, retired Marine Colonel W.A. Kengla, like his federal counterpart, reported that his office "was bombarded by questions and requests for Civil Defense information" following Kennedy's speech. A writer to the American-Statesman two months later revealed an element of com-
Community support for civil defense: "Noah didn't wait to get drowned," he wrote, "he built a boat. Maybe we'd be better off if the weak sisters did die off, and then our descendents wouldn't inherit any rabbit genes." That same month the Austin city council congratulated itself on its large civil defense budget of $76,500, which included money for seventeen warning sirens, an auxiliary generator for the police department, and a mobile command post, and congratulated the volunteers who were aiding Colonel Kengla. One councilman declared that "everyone was talking about Civil Defense."*

As Austin-Travis County's first full-time, paid civil defense director — a post in which he served through the 1960s — Colonel Kengla became the center of information and action for the local defense effort. "We must eliminate ignorance, eliminate frustration, and minimize fear," he said in an Austin American interview at the beginning of civil defense mania, and with missionary zeal he spread the word. Preaching his doctrine at meetings of the Austin Parent-Teachers Association, the Elgin community civil defense committee, the Manor Book Club, Sunday School classes, and the Austin Women's Club, Kengla consistently remained optimistic about the city's chances for surviving a nuclear attack and of the eventual conversion of Austin to the civil defense cause. As late as April 1962, he maintained, "I believe there is a good hard core nucleus around which community-wide interest can be built."

To that end he distributed thousands of pamphlets published by the federal government. Local civil defense officials gathered about ten pamphlets into a "Family and Home Survival Kit." The large brown envelopes in which they were distributed were printed with important phone numbers, the various alert signals, and brief instructions, including the timely reminder "Important: If you see a bright flash of light, take cover instantly." The envelopes were filled with booklets and pamphlets on first-aid, home food storage, instructions on dealing with fallout on the farm, home fallout shelters, tornado precautions, a brief summary of the national civil defense plan, and an abbreviated version of the instructions printed on a convenient wallet-sized card. Kengla had initially hoped that block volunteers would be able to place a kit in every home in Austin, but by early in 1962, ten local junior high schools and ten other Travis County schools were distributing the material. Kengla fell far short of his goal. Late in the fall a government survey conducted by University of Texas sociologist Harry Moore found that while over eighty percent of Austin's residents knew that Austin had a civil defense program, two-thirds of them failed to remember where they had heard about it and only nine percent recalled receiving printed information from the local civil defense office.10

The survey also discovered that only sixty-two of the 500 respondents had completed the twelve-hour civil defense course where specially trained local volunteers taught groups of ten to twenty adults about attack warning, evacuation, shelter construction, radiation, and decontamination
procedures. In Austin, the Texas Education Agency had trained forty-three teachers, but a lack of funds with which to pay janitorial costs resulted in a paucity of classrooms. Local PTA clubs offered to cover those costs and American Legion Post 83 contributed the use of their building for classes, but the shortage of rooms continued and enrollment remained low. Colonel Kengla estimated in April 1962 that a total of 2000 had completed the course, which was only one percent of the population living within the city limits, far below even Moore's findings. 11

A wide array of other steps helped to "prepare" Austin for a nuclear emergency. Austin schools devised evacuation procedures, the city and county governments cooperated with the Red Cross in preparing an emergency plan, and Holy Cross Hospital constructed blast and fallout shelters. The City Council ordered additional equipment and disaster training for city employees and connected the downtown Muzak system to an emergency public address system at police headquarters. Several local and out-of-town firms tried to cash in on the local shelter market, and for several years during the 1960s "Fallout Shelter" earned its own Yellow Pages entry. 12

Several episodes provided less than encouraging publicity for Austin's civil defense, however. In April 1961, several months before the mania erupted, a front page headline in the Austin Statesman reported "Siren Alert Mishap Here Causes Panic." A mechanical failure in a South Austin warning siren had caused it to sound the evening before the monthly tests authorized by the city council were to begin. Callers jammed the telephone lines at the police and fire departments and at the American Statesman, all radio and television stations in the city went off the air for ten minutes, and a policeman described the reaction of the South Austin citizenry as "absolute panic." In May the city was plagued by more problems with its warning system. Investigators discovered that the wires to one tower had been cut and three other sirens failed to work properly during the monthly drill. 13

Incidents like these could only hurt Austin's civil defense program, and the efforts of Colonel Kengla and his staff accomplished much less than anyone had hoped. By November, only forty-two of the 500 respondents to Moore's survey were working with the local civil defense office, few had built shelters or taken the civil defense course, and over half could not give "a general ... description" of a shelter. "The conclusion seems inescapable," Moore wrote, "that Austin as of November 1961, was not as well prepared to face nuclear war as was desirable, [and] that there was little indication of a radical change in this situation for the immediate future because both knowledge of potential danger and active leadership were lacking." Kengla concurred, despite his optimistic assertion about a "hard core nucleus" of interested persons, in an interview with the Austin American after the results of Moore's survey were released in April 1962. While maintaining that "a lot has happened since the survey
terminated," he also admitted that "we still don't have the kind of interest I want to see in the community and the type which is necessary for community action."

Despite their neighbors' lack of interest, a few Austinites carried on a lively debate that followed many of the positions featured at the national level. An exchange between an American Statesman columnist and the author of a letter to the editor revealed each side's most compelling arguments. Betty McNabb, the columnist, dismissed fallout shelters and the talk of surviving radioactive fallout as "just a lot of meaningless chitchat at best," but "at worst ... a mind-freezing sleep-chasing black shadow that ... gets bigger and blacker as the megaton count mounts." McNabb included herself among those "who would prefer the poison [of fallout] to the home of mole and maggot. The shape of a shelter is as near like a coffin as makes no difference." A week later, Dorris Conway responded to this vivid pronouncement of principles, expressing their surprise that a "lovely, sensible woman like Betty McNabb" would write such an article. Conway believed that to give up as McNabb had done was to commit "deliberate, unmistakable suicide." Most Americans would not make the same choice, she wrote, "because we don't believe in a healthy man's right to commit suicide and because we are determined to preserve for our children and their children the American dream of freedom." Emphasizing the difficulty of post-attack life and refusing to concede the inevitability of nuclear war, Conway nevertheless accused McNabb and those who thought as she did of taking the easy way out: "they'd want no part of the months of extremely difficult existence after the bomb, no part of the job of rebuilding a nation with a dream worth saving."

The true dimensions of Austin's civil defense debate are revealed more accurately by the fact that at no time in the fall of 1961 did civil defense become a political issue in Austin. The City Council generally ignored it unless Colonel Kengla brought it to their attention, when they cheerfully — and unanimously — would appropriate small amounts of money, often with the promise of matching federal funds. As Moore's survey showed, few non-politicians bothered with civil defense, either. The only public expression that went beyond letter writing, touring prototype shelters, reading civil defense literature, or joining committees, came on a Saturday in February 1962, when members of Austin for Peaceful Alternatives, who opposed nuclear arms and believed civil defense would only encourage their use, and Young Americans for Freedom, who held the opposite points of view, confronted one another on the Texas capitol grounds. Both groups handed out leaflets and displayed banners. For example, APC-ers carried "The Deeper the Shelter, the Bigger the Bombs," while "Nuclear Testing Assures Peace" was a part of the YAF's arsenal of slogans. Some shouting eventually broke out, but violence was averted and nothing more was reported about the two groups in the city's newspapers. In some respects, this mini-demonstration signalled both the high point and the
end of civil defense mania in Austin. 16

The inevitable conclusion about civil defense in Austin, as Harry Moore and even Colonel Kengla knew, was that few residents of the city did anything to protect themselves from a nuclear attack. More important, however, are the reasons people did or did not participate. Although civil defense programs had been around for well over a decade before 1961, and still exist today, neither before nor after 1961 was the general public asked to contribute so much to the civil defense effort. In some ways, their reactions to the government's plans and to the programs developed by local authorities reflected the ways in which they chose to deal with the Cold War.

Civil defense attracted some converts because it lent itself readily to organization. Federal, regional, state, and local civil defense programs were supported by many temporary and permanent organizations that were open to "joiners" of both sexes. Austin's Ground Observer Corps of the 1950s provides an excellent example of the enthusiasm occasionally generated by civil defense. Mayor Tom Miller declared February 22 - March 1, 1956, "Ground Observer Week," and organizers held a mass rally at City Coliseum to recruit 1500 volunteer sky-watchers to guard the city against low-flying enemy planes. The program included patriotic songs sung by a local high school choir and talks by Air Force representatives. On the day of the meeting the Austin American reported that the response "has been enthusiastic and several civic organizations are attending Monday night's meeting in a body to tender their services in the Corps." Four years earlier a similar volunteer drive was conducted by 110 national and state-wide organizations, including twenty-two women's groups. The drive began on Armistice Day and ended on Thanksgiving, and was designed to "form a reserve of manpower for service in civil defense." 17

Other community and professional organizations joined the civil defense cause. The Travis County Medical Society established plans for handling local disasters in 1958, while during "Operation Alert" in the spring of 1961 over 1000 Texas ham radio operators contributed their time to the nation-wide test. During the height of civil defense mania later that year, the Austin PTA formed Civil Defense and Safety for the Austin Council of Parents and Teachers, which encouraged parents to take the civil defense course and offered Austin teachers $5 for every hour of instruction they performed after taking the eighteen-hour instructor's course. Colonel Kengla also enjoyed the cooperation of local boys' clubs, the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, the Texas State Guard, and the Austin-Travis County Shelter Board. The latter appointed volunteers to numerous committees involved with the shelter survey, research and development, public relations, and civil orientation, information, and speakers. Shelter-related groups included committees on site utilization, new construction, residential shelters, conversion of existing structures, and financing and legislation. The Board attracted Austinites who were drawn to public ser-
vice organizations; the organizer of the GOC headed the Board’s voluntary recruitment committee, local celebrity Cactus Pryor helped with publicity, and Charles P. Davis, a Chamber of Commerce director, merchant of survival products, and home shelter owner chaired the manufacturers and supplies committee.18

State-wide organizations also hopped onto the civil defense bandwagon. An Office of Civilian and Defense Mobilization, Texas Division of Defense and Disaster Relief, and Agricultural Extension Service program distributed rural civil defense kits through county extension agents, 4-H clubs, the Future Homemakers of America, and members of these and other youth organizations could earn certificates by participating in group and individual projects related to civil defense. The state civil defense office also sponsored a state Youth Council, which, along with the State Women’s Civil Defense Advisory Council, was formed in the 1950s. These groups considered the respective roles of youth and women in civil defense work. An important woman in civil defense was Grace M. Martin, the state consultant for women’s activities. Her column in the Texas Defense Digest consistently praised and advertised individual and group efforts in civil defense around the state. “Our job will not be complete,” she wrote in the summer of 1961, “until every home is prepared and every person trained ... It’s your job and mine to ‘learn and live.’” 19

With its highly participatory activities, civil defense offered more than mere survival. The opening of new civil defense facilities warranted ceremony, as in the spring of 1960, when Governor Price Daniel opened the first prototype family shelter in the Southwest Region at Austin’s Zilker Park. A month later the national director of the Office of Civilian and Defense Mobilization, Leo A. Heogh, flew to Austin to cut the ribbon at the opening of a home fallout shelter built in Austin’s University Hills subdivision. In October 1962, Harrison County celebrated Civil Defense Day, where residents could view emergency equipment, listen to a speech by state civil defense coordinator James H. Garner, and applaud the selection of “Miss Civil Defense.” Everyone could get into the act. In March 1961, Austin’s Boy Scout Troop 412 presented their home-made model fallout shelters at the Scout-o-rama show and the “highlight” of the Violet Crown Garden Club’s gala in Austin a month later was a full-sized shelter model. Like many other civil activities, an element of competition entered civil defense, and articles that reported civil defense accomplishments often emphasized this aspect. The Longview Jay-Cees were “among the first in the nation” to complete a model fallout shelter as part of a nationwide Junior Chamber of Commerce/Office of Civilian and Defense Mobilization project; Polk County had forty-two trained first aid instructors by early in 1962, “more than any other county in the United States on a population percentage basis”; the Delta Zeta sorority at the University of Texas at Austin was “the first among such Greek groups in the nation” to build a shelter in its sorority house; and Texas’ “outstanding
record" in civil defense education — with 100,000 adults having completed the course by the summer of 1962 — "leads the nation in participation in this program." 20

With so many activities and organizations and so much publicity, there was also plenty of room for individual recognition. This ranged from seeing one's own letter published in the local newspaper to teaching courses in civil defense. People who completed the course received a suitable-for-framing certificate and often found their names in the paper the next morning. The course instructors, of course, enjoyed a certain amount of authority and received more ink. Men or women looking for a group to join might be interested in something like the Grand Observors Corps, while club members casting about for an appropriate project for which to accept responsibility and win a little recognition might chair the Garden Club civil defense committee or organize a lecture by Colonel Kengla. Citizens hoping to improve their standing in the community might become block wardens or neighborhood experts on first aid. Concerned citizens became heroes for a day or a month. The Austin American reported Emmett Shelton, Jr.'s attempt to get enough of his neighbors together to warrant a civil defense course in West Lake Hills; Weldon Stimson became the city's archetypal civil defense worker by driving his own ambulance without pay, conducting tours of the Zilker Park model shelter, and instructing civil defense courses in his own office building; seventy-year-old Mrs. Bess Odell Beeman included the Ground Observer's Corps and the Women's Advisory Council on Civil Defense among her dozens of community organizations. The media showcased Shelter Board member Charles P. Davis several times — his newsworthiness stemmed from the 10½' by 35' shelter he built into his new $90,000 house, his hardware store's local monopoly on a General Mills survival food, and the arsenal of weapons with which he intended to defend his fallout shelter. The Texas Defense Digest exaggerated when it said late in 1961 that "last year's 'nut-on-civil-defense,' " the "poor soul ... usually classed with the local Townshend Plan advocate," had become "this year's community leader" with a "status ... approaching that of the local boy who made good in Big League baseball." Nevertheless, during civil defense mania this change in perceptions undoubtedly occurred in some towns and neighborhoods, or at least in the minds of some of the participants. 21

The foregoing is not meant to imply that the very small minority of Austinites who built fallout shelters did so out of a yearning for public attention. Their main concerns were their own and their families' protection. But it is also a mistake to ignore the huge amount of activity that swirled around the periphery of the shelter controversy. To most people interested in Austin's civil defense those activities were much more important than the shelters that few of them would build. For many, their participation performed a function; perhaps their fears could be quieted merely by carrying out some sort of civil or club duty, or by distributing
or reading civil defense literature. The performing of a few relatively easy, inexpensive, and harmless activities at least partly relieved whatever tension was created in them by the Cold War as it stood in 1961. They did not need fallout shelters to protect them from the perceived threat of fallout. In addition, the need to belong to or even to lead some sort of peer group combined with this sense of emergency to make civil defense activities rewarding to a number of people. James H. Garner, the coordinator of Texas civil defense from 1959-63, discussing a block warden he knew, said that her position of nominal leadership "fulfilled something that was needed in her life": status, access to every home on the block, a measure of respect. In addition, he believed, the self-sufficiency aspect of civil defense attracted enthusiasts, as did the sort of organization and discipline enjoyed by the "lunatic fringe" that emergency situations tend to spawn. 22

Another facet of the civil defense campaign probably contributed to whatever success it experienced; many commentators refused to deal with nuclear war as being different from other disasters. An article in the Austin American in November 1961 dismissed predictions that neighbors would turn against neighbors because they never had in any previous disaster. Closely related to this is the atmosphere that surrounded civil defense presentations. Speeches were delivered in school auditoriums and cafeterias while classes were taught in school rooms, offices, and American Legion halls. Luncheons were served, children were kept occupied with movies while their parents met, and business meetings were held after the talks. These affairs were conducted in familiar surroundings, and PTA and Garden Club members who chose not to join a civil defense group or take the course could learn "what responsibilities parents and children will have in case of attack and the feasibility of evacuation" without breaking their routines or making a special effort. Civil defense became a normal part of some people's lives — comforting, perhaps even ennobling, but undemanding. 23

This same process may have discouraged people from participating in civil defense because they resented the trivialization of such an important issue. When Moore asked his respondents why they had not built a fallout shelter, over forty percent offered no answer, and it is entirely possible that a similar percentage of Austinites would have been unable to say exactly why they chose not to participate in other civil defense activities. Many probably would have claimed to have had too little time, while others would have dismissed them as worthless busy work. Yet it would probably also be true that they decided not to take part at least partly because their own personal needs were not the same as those of their neighbors who did participate. It is likely that a few actually did not fear a nuclear attack, while others refused to believe in the efficacy of civil defense. In addition, unlike many participants, they failed to see how these activities could personally benefit them, socially or psychologically. Some failed
to take part for the same reasons they chose not to join the Veterans of Foreign Wars or the women's circle at their church. They may have rejected the boosterism and competition that characterized many of the groups' efforts; in their eyes, civil defense may have become subordinate to the interests of the participants. The committees became ends unto themselves and the meetings became mere social events. Rejecting the "well-meaning little old ladies" who James Garner said were in the "vanguard" of civil defense work, non-participants rejected civil defense entirely.  

In practical terms, the Austin civil defense mania of 1961 accomplished little. Except for various surveys conducted in the 1960s and the stock-in of fallout shelters in existing buildings, the government’s attempt to involve all Americans in the defense of the country and of themselves created plenty of smoke but little fire. Civil defense became something people rarely thought about — unless they accidentally ran across the garish yellow and black signs that still mark the shelter spaces surveyed by the government. It became yet another function, performed, however inadequately, by the United States government. But for many Austinites — and perhaps Americans — in 1961, the mania forced them to deal with the threat of nuclear arms. Whether they dispelled their fears by participating to some degree in civil defense or rejected civil defense because they perceived the situation to be far less superficial than many of the activities surrounding it or because they failed to benefit in any way from it, these people were all learning to cope with the Cold War. Harry Moore may have been unfair when he introduced his survey of Austin's attitudes toward fallout shelters with an old Spanish proverb: "In the world of the blind, a one-eyed man is king." On the contrary, many Austinites knew exactly what they were doing.

NOTES

1Texas Defense Digest, 8 (November-December 1960), 2.
2Informants were asked, "Have you made any plans or given any serious thoughts to preparing your home in case of nuclear attack?" George Gallup, ed., The Gallup Poll, 1935-1971, Vol. III (New York, 1972), 1741.
3Harry Estill Moore, Attitudes and Knowledge Concerning Fallout Shelters in Austin Texas (Washington, 1962), 58; Austin Statesman, June 26, 1962. About 35,000 shelters were ready, but another 130,643 would be available after alterations.
1Austin American, July 31, 1961; Austin American, April 20, 1962.


4Austin American, October 18, 1961, December 1, 1961, August 17, 1961; Austin City Council Minute Book 38, 224, February 8, 1962 and Austin American, February 17, 1962; Austin American, February 11, 1962; Austin City Council Minute Book 38, 1197, October 25, 1962; Austin American, September 17, 1961; Austin Telephone Directory, 1960-1968, Austin-Travis County Collection.


7Austin Statesman, November 2, 1961; Austin American, November 9, 1961.


9Austin American, February 20, 1956, Austin Statesman, July 20, 1956, American Statesman, February 27, 1956, American Statesman, November 9, 1952, all from Clippings File, Austin-Travis County Collection.


14Personal interview with James H. Garner, April 14, 1983, Wimberly, Texas.
