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The Eternal Fallout Shelter

We're still living in the wake left by Cold War civil defense hysteria.

IN THE SUMMER OF 1961, 100 pessimistic members of an Arizona-based religious sect called the Full Gospel Assembly Church spent about \$250,000 (in current dollars) on food, locked up their homes, and descended into a half dozen nearby bomb shelters that they had recently constructed. There they waited patiently for the Soviets to destroy America with a hailstorm of atom bombs.

Although the Lord had tipped them that an attack was imminent, a day passed, and then a week passed, and then a month passed; apparently the godless Russians were too busy celebrating their recent mastery of human space flight to fulfill divine prophecy. So on August 16, after 42 days underground, the followers of the Full Gospel Assembly Church resurfaced, alive and presumably well-fed, to find the world pretty much as they'd left it.

Fifty years later, Armageddon still threatens to drift in on any breeze. The Soviet Union is gone, but in its place we've got leaky reactors, kooky dictators, Islamic dead-enders, shaky tectonic plates, solar tsunamis, the shrinking thermosphere, pole shifts, and whatever's causing thousands of dead birds to drop from the skies en masse. Is it any surprise that new home sales hit record lows in February? Who wants to lock himself into a 30-year mortgage when the Mayan apocalypse is just around the corner?

While traditional real estate sales are slumping, end times mean boom times for other sectors of the market. In March, CNNMoney.com reported that "U.S. companies selling doomsday bunkers are seeing sales skyrocket anywhere from 20 percent to 1,000 percent." In 2011 home sweet home is a \$100,000 turnkey fiberglass pod for eight from Radius Engineering. Or a \$25,000 co-ownership share in the Vivos Group's four-

level, 137,000-square-foot communal luxury bunker outside Omaha, which boasts, amongst other amenities, a fully stocked wine cellar, an urgent care hospital, a hair salon, pet kennels, and the ability to withstand a 50-megaton nuclear blast within 10 miles.

To hear the Vivos Group's Robert Vicino tell it, Uncle Sam is definitely not a part of Apocalypse America's welcome wagon, at least if you're Joe Sixpack. "You know the government has underground facilities," Vicino says. "They're in Colorado, New Mexico, a half mile down, large shelters that can accommodate 5,000 people. They've got extensive equipment down there, earth-boring machines, so if they get buried under whatever, they can bore themselves back out. This is our tax dollars at work. But who are these shelters for? Not us. They're for the government, the elite, the military. The locations of these places are on a need-to-know basis, and you're not on the list."

Oh, if only the government really had so little interest in our fates! In truth, today's bomb shelter industry pretty much owes its existence to the government's pioneering efforts. All seven of the nuclear-hardened facilities the Vivos Group is currently outfitting for a full menu of potential "life extinction events," for example, were originally built by the government during the Cold War. Even more important than the physical infrastructure the state bequeathed to today's doomsday entrepreneurs is the psychological groundwork that agencies like the Federal Civil Defense Administration and the Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization laid at mid-century. It wasn't just God who was urging the Full Gospel Assembly Church to go underground in 1961. In the 10 years prior, the federal government had sunk at least \$4.82 billion (in current dollars) into civil defense and the idea

that, as civil defense bureaucrat Leo Hoegh put it in the 1959 film *Walt Builds a Family Fallout Shelter*, “No home in America is modern without a fallout shelter.”

In *Fallout Shelter* (University of Minnesota Press), David Monteyne, a professor of architecture at the University of Calgary, contemplates how Cold War civil defense practices helped expand “the goals and powers of the welfare state.” In *Bomboozled* (Pointed Leaf Press), the architecture writer Susan Roy draws on an illuminating and hilarious trove of government pamphlets, magazine pictorials, and advertisements that suggest how America’s burgeoning nuclear arsenal, ostensibly designed to protect the country’s citizens from the monolithic, all-encroaching rule of the commies, also made capitalist individuals more dependent than ever on their own government and more vulnerable to its increasingly intimate efforts to supervise their lives. “Good clean housekeeping is Civil Defense Housekeeping,” exclaims a pamphlet titled *Atomic Blast Creates Fire*. “Dissolve nine ounces of Borax and four ounces of boric acid in a gallon of water. Dip your curtains, drapes, and slipcovers in it.”

Naturally, the federal government aspired to do more than advise its citizens on laundry preparedness. In the mid-1950s, Roy reveals, civil defense authorities wanted every American to wear dog tags. A few years later, the Department of Defense was eager to install “black box” buzzers in 60 million homes and offices as a means of alerting citizens in times of crises. As early as 1950, President Harry Truman was proposing an \$18.6 billion (in current dollars) shelter-building program. In ensuing years, various

federal officials and committees proposed shelter construction blueprints with estimated costs as high as \$288 billion (in current dollars). In 1960 Gov. Nelson Rockefeller attempted to pass legislation that would have made it mandatory for every existing structure in the state of New York to add a fallout shelter by 1963.

Despite what a 1961 issue of *Good Housekeeping* derided as “massive propaganda to induce Americans to burrow underground like worms,” officials were never able to secure the level of funding a widespread shelter-building program would require. The government’s more general efforts

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to persuade citizens to build shelters on their own dime were only slightly more successful. After a decade of federal proselytizing, *Newsweek* noted in July 1961, American families had built around 2,000 shelters. In contrast, they’d built around 300,000 swimming pools during that time. (A *New York Times* article, also from July 1961, put the estimated total of family bomb shelters in the U.S. at 60,000.)

But the government didn’t give up easily. In late 1961, it began assessing potential locations in already-existing buildings that might provide shelter against fallout if not an actual atomic blast, and eventually it convinced more than 100,000 building owners to stockpile their basements with “all-purpose survival biscuits” and other supplies. To publicize these sites, the government posted more than 670,000 black-and-yellow fallout

shelter signs throughout the country, Monteyne writes, “remind[ing] its citizens at every turn, on every block, that it could protect them.”

Out of such ubiquitous signage and the establishment of “preparedness” as a civic virtue of the highest order, the federal government solidified its status as an increasingly panoptic and proscriptive presence in our lives whose mandate is to shelter us from all manner of catastrophe: economic, environmental, nutritional, you name it. While entrepreneurs like Robert Vicino find it advantageous to portray the feds as elitist overlords with little desire to protect us from asteroid strikes and super volcanoes, the government’s willingness to lend a hand in moments of cataclysm has actually mushroomed like an atomic blast over the last decade. From 1953 through 1970, for example, the government declared an average of only 15.5 official “federal disasters” per year, and spent comparatively little cleaning up after Mother Nature’s excesses. From 2001 through the first half of 2011, it declared an average of 55 federal disasters per year.

If you’re a cash-strapped high school looking to build a new \$2 million gymnasium, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) will fund 75 percent if you make it durable enough to withstand a tornado. If you own a mobile home park and you’d like to build a storm shelter for your tenants, the feds will give you the same deal. FEMA hasn’t gotten around to issuing a pamphlet on how best to prepare your drapes for Mayan Doomsday, but give it time. It still has a few months left. ■

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