



## One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture (American History and Culture)

By Kenneth D. Rose

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For the half-century duration of the Cold War, the fallout shelter was a curiously American preoccupation. Triggered in 1961 by a hawkish speech by John F. Kennedy, the fallout shelter controversy—"to dig or not to dig," as *Business Week* put it at the time—forced many Americans to grapple with deeply disturbing dilemmas that went to the very heart of their self-image about what it meant to be an American, an upstanding citizen, and a moral human being.

Given the much-touted nuclear threat throughout the 1960s and the fact that 4 out of 5 Americans expressed a preference for nuclear war over living under communism, what's perhaps most striking is how few American actually built backyard shelters. Tracing the ways in which the fallout shelter became an icon of popular culture, Kenneth D. Rose also investigates the troubling issues the shelters raised: Would a post-war world even be worth living in? Would shelter construction send the Soviets a message of national resolve, or rather encourage political and military leaders to think in terms of a "winnable" war?

Investigating the role of schools, television, government bureaucracies, civil defense, and literature, and rich in fascinating detail—including a detailed tour of the vast fallout shelter in Greenbriar, Virginia, built to harbor the entire United States Congress in the event of nuclear armageddon—**One Nation, Underground** goes to the very heart of America's Cold War experience.

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Although Rose (history, California State Univ., Chico; *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*) might have wished his popular history of the Cold War to work from below ground on up, his excavation of the great fear of the Fifties reveals a discourse overwhelmingly top-down. Government and civic elites propagandized for shelters built from theoretical funds that mostly were never appropriated; average citizens fretted that their neighbors were building bunkers to exclude them come Armageddon, yet apparently very few private spaces were ever erected. Rose demonstrates that the shelter was the leading if least visible icon of a civil defense debate that questioned whether nuclear wars were confinable, hence survivable, but also whether shelter was more practical or at least not incompatible with mass evacuation. Rose reconstructs Herman Kahn, the pro-limited nuclear war physicist/Dr. Strangelove model, as the most intriguing if possibly insane personage in his account but leaves much possibly fertile soil unturned. (What did history's most famous shelterists, the World War II British, think of their Yankee cousins' official mania only a few years later?) This book fails to live up to the originality promised by the subject but as a first-of-area undertaking should be acquired by academic libraries. Scott H. Silverman, Bryn Mawr Coll. Lib., PA  
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### Review

"This compelling chronicle of the civil defense debate during the early years of the Cold War shows how discussions of the pros and cons of fallout shelters forced Americans to face the possible consequences of nuclear war and what kind of world any survivors would inhabit. In the national soul-searching that ensued, citizens confronted their deepest fears, values, and attitudes about themselves, their neighbors, and their world. *One Nation Underground* reminds us of the real terror that gripped the world in the tense years of nuclear brinksmanship."

-Elaine Tyler May, author of *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*

"*One Nation Underground* vividly evokes a fast-fading era of U.S. history when millions of Americans contemplated the prospect of huddling in underground shelters to escape the blast and radiation of thermonuclear war. Kenneth D. Rose brings into sharp focus these years when nuclear fear pervaded American public life and culture, gripping Pentagon Strategists, civil-defense planners, theologians, magazine editors, and the authors of comic books and science-fiction stories. Beautifully written, copiously illustrated, and drawing upon an amazing range of sources, this engrossing book should be read by anyone interested in the domestic fallout of the Cold War nuclear arms race."

-Paul S. Boyer, author of *By the Bomb's Early Light and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*

"Kenneth Rose's **One Nation Underground** explores U.S. nuclear history from the bottom up—literally. . . . Rose deserves credit for not trivializing this period of our history, as so many retrospectives of the Cold War era have tended to do."

-*Journal of Cold War Studies*

"Rose critically nails the ambivalence of the general population toward sheltering."

*-Technology and Culture*

"This fascinating and illuminating study ably traces Civil Defense from Bert the Turtle's school drills in the 1950s to backyard family shelters in the early sixties. As Kenneth Rose insightfully shows, Americans, panicked over Cold War tensions and the threat of thermonuclear incineration, talked inordinately about fallout shelters, but few were ever built. That discrepancy reveals much about American society, culture, and psychology. This book almost glows in the dark."

*-W. J. Rorabaugh, author of Berkeley at War: The 1960s*

About the Author

**Kenneth D. Rose** teaches at California State University and is author of *American Women and the Repeal of Prohibition*.

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