explanatory notes at the beginning of each major section of testimony, Polenberg’s edition endows the proceeding with a sharper focus than it actually had and eliminates some of its ambiguity. As a result, readers may now understand more clearly how Oppenheimer was placed at a disadvantage. But the same readers may find it even harder to understand how the AEC Personnel Security Board could possibly have reached its adverse conclusion in good faith.


Reviewed by Laura McEnaney, Whittier College

Kenneth Rose’s One Nation Underground explores U.S. nuclear history from the bottom up—literally. He examines the fallout shelter not as Cold War kitsch but as Cold War artifact, a subterranean physical space in which policymakers and citizens alike played out their apocalyptic fears, political interests, and moral quandaries. Rose helps us understand that in the anxious years of the Berlin and Cuban missile crises, the fallout shelter was less a real protective device than a malleable metaphor about the U.S. nuclear predicament. “Like few other icons,” Rose argues, “the fallout shelter was a conundrum, a riddle whose meaning was always just beyond reach” (p. 213). Rose tries to solve this riddle by excavating the most important political, scientific, and popular cultural debates of the 1950s and 1960s, the decades in which Americans had to reconcile themselves to the real possibility of nuclear war.

Rose begins his narrative by reviewing the development of Cold War diplomacy and nuclear defense policies in the years following World War Two. Some of this is familiar territory, but it provides important background material for the general reader. In line with the findings of recent scholarship on the nuclear age, Rose shows that scientific research, congressional investigation, and bureaucratic expansion proceeded apace ten years after Hiroshima, but none of it yielded a coherent civil defense program. Neither the Truman nor the Eisenhower administration could resolve the basic technological or logistical problems: Blast shelters could not spare people from increasingly powerful bombs, and evacuation from city to suburb to countryside was proven a failure with each trial run. By 1955 the revelation that radioactive fallout could not be safely contained in the blast area exposed the futility of government proposals for blast shelters and evacuation. Rose pointedly reminds readers of some of the ridiculous advice disseminated after this revelation: Val Peterson, the head of the U.S. civil defense agency, proposed that fleeing urbanites could escape fallout exposure by building a roadside trench, covering it with tar paper, and huddling underneath until the air cleared (p. 31).

One Nation Underground turns from the fanciful scenarios of defense planners to the disaster plots of postwar multimedia, and this purposeful segue reveals that the producers of nuclear-age fiction, comic books, and B movies shared the doomsday
preoccupations of those in the civil defense bureaucracy. Both camps were wrestling with essential questions about human behavior during and after nuclear attack. Rose identifies a “nuclear apocalyptic,” a “distinctive subgenre of speculative literature” (p. 38) that explored life after nuclear attack, replete with grisly images of oozing wounds and burned corpses littering the landscape. Most of this literature probed the moral and philosophical dilemmas that would emerge from the scarcity of resources and general social chaos of a post-attack society. Rose smartly points out that this kind of dystopian speculation was not just the stuff of underground magazines. Mainstream newspapers appropriated the conventions of science fiction to spin their own apocalyptic tales to wider audiences. Citing examples from Collier’s, Good Housekeeping, and the Los Angeles Times, Rose demonstrates that journalists’ hypothetical accounts were often some of the scariest facsimiles of doomsday in circulation. In the end, Rose contends, the “nuclear apocalyptic” literature freighted the shelter debate “with a distinctive millenarian urgency” (p. 38), but it did not weigh heavily on those who made policy. And yet, within the apocalyptic literature, Rose suggests, lay a “populist attack on a political establishment that insisted on maintaining a dangerous, even insane, strategy” (p. 76) of nuclear annihilation, a strategy that might have generated a sort of people’s protest against the notion of burrowing underground.

Rose spends considerable time describing the symbolic politics of the fallout shelter and the implications of moving a polyglot population underground. Critics argued that a massive shelter program would signify to other countries either cowardly retreat or excessive military readiness—a “garrison state.” Others worried that the fallout shelter represented a discouraging concession to the likelihood of a future nuclear war. Skeptics also raised unsettling questions about the kind of human relationships a shelter system might engender. Rose focuses on the “gun-thy-neighbor” controversy that grew out of the 1961 panic wave regarding Berlin and U.S. nuclear vulnerability. Private citizens, clergy, artists, writers, editorialists, and myriad others debated whether shelter owners should share their privately financed family retreat with neighbors or guard the hatch with a loaded pistol. Rose claims that the reputation of the home shelter was damaged by this vigorous national debate and that President John F. Kennedy reacted by endorsing public rather than private sheltering (pp. 97–98).

Here, Rose’s assertions need better support. Given the paltry number of home shelters that existed by 1960 (reported as 1,565, although these numbers are far from certain), one wonders whether there really was a reputation to be damaged in the first place. Kennedy’s policy shift from private to public shelters also requires deeper explanation, for throughout the 1950s defense policymakers fluctuated between public and private solutions to the country’s nuclear woes, influenced more by budgetary priorities, partisan politics, and foreign policy crises than by popular discussions.

Ultimately, of course, the vision of “one nation underground” did not materialize, and Rose offers a variety of explanations for why this was so. He argues that shelter proponents lacked persuasive metaphors to capture the public imagination. Critics, in contrast, had an arsenal of such metaphors (the caveman, the mole, the barbarian), which made it easier to seize and steer the debates about shelters in more dovish directions. As Rose puts it: “To a great extent shelterists lost the political war because they
lost the metaphor war” (p. 112). Other mitigating factors included the prohibitive cost of home shelters, congressional resistance to funding “passive” defense measures (versus “active” missile-defense technologies), and an ambient fatalism about surviving an attack from bombs with unfathomable destructive power. Rose also notes that the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the deepening war in Vietnam undermined political and public interest in the whole issue of shelter survival. But the main reason that the shelter program faltered and then failed, Rose claims, is that Americans consciously rejected the personal and ethical choices that a shelter culture would necessitate. Deeply “disturbed by the troubling moral aspects of shelters” (p. 209), citizens overwhelmingly rejected the sheltered life. According to Rose, only a tiny percentage of the population built home shelters in the 1960s, and public shelters were scarce and woefully understocked.

Rose deserves credit for not trivializing this period of our history, as so many retrospectives of the Cold War era have tended to do. He deserves praise for rejecting superficial explanations about public apathy that too often substitute for serious historical analysis of the curious gap between people’s awareness of the nuclear threat and their reluctance to participate in home defense. Still, Rose’s research is more muscular than his thesis. The book would benefit from a stronger authorial voice, which pops up here and there but is too often drowned out by the patter from his impressive body of evidence. And yet, these anecdotes and vivid quotations, as well as photographic evidence, enable the reader to get a real flavor of the cultural moment Rose is trying to capture. His writing is clear, never condescending, and the text contains few questionable digressions. The book deserves a wide readership, for the history lessons of the Cold War should guide us as the United States moves through another phase of government-sponsored “homeland security.”

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Review by Robert A. Pastor, American University

Two decades ago President Ronald Reagan described the struggle for Central America as pitting the forces of good against evil. The “evil ones” were not terrorists from the Middle East but Marxists in Central America, and of course the United States was the “shining city on the hill.” That epic battle faded with the end of the Cold War, but the apocalyptic rhetoric of that debate has returned since 2001 in another guise.

William LeoGrande has brought to life the Central American wars of the late 1970s and 1980s. Some readers might be discouraged by the book’s heft and temporal distance from today’s world, but they would be mistaken. LeoGrande writes with verve; the book is long but not wordy. He is concise in depicting events, and if he captures too many debates, the reader benefits from learning how the policy evolved and affected the battles in Central America. His profiles of key actors, such as Reagan’s first