

## A Frightening Message for a Thanksgiving Issue (1958)

Editors of Good Housekeeping

*In the aftermath of World War II, when the United States had sole possession of atomic weapons, many Americans saw "the bomb" as a guarantee of national power and security. But almost immediately after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, others spoke of the immense threat such a weapon posed to the survival of humanity. As Americans learned, in 1949, that the Soviet Union had tested an atomic bomb, and then a nuclear weapon in 1953, fear of a nuclear exchange grew. As the editors of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists explained in 1954, "an untoward event tomorrow may trigger a tense world to erupt in flames of atomic or thermonuclear warfare . . . [with] 'no place to hide' for the great masses of civilized mankind."*

*America's civil defense planners attempted to prepare the public for the possibility of nuclear attack. The Civil Defense Office's 1950 publication, the frighteningly inaccurate Survival Under Atomic Attack, reassured Americans that they could survive an atomic attack without "protective clothing or special training." Chances of "making a complete recovery" from exposure to atomic radiation, it claimed, "are much the same as for every day accidents." And "there is one important thing you can do to lessen your chances of injury by blast: Fall flat on your face." Children watched Bert the Turtle explain what to do in the event of atomic war in the animated film Duck and Cover, and practiced "duck and cover" drills in their school classrooms. Increasingly, American magazines carried speculative fiction detailing nuclear holocaust and its aftermath in the United States. This article, the monthly editorial message in the November (Thanksgiving) issue of Good Housekeeping, portrays an atomic attack on St. Louis, Missouri. Why does it suggest that atomic attack is virtually inevitable? And why might this article make the claim that—even faced with such national catastrophe—*

From *Good Housekeeping*, November 1958, p. 61.

*survival depends on the preparations of individuals, not the action of federal or local government agencies?*

This is an article about nuclear warfare and what will happen to you if it comes.

Even though the article is printed on this important page, most people won't read it. And that's too bad, because it could save their lives.

Very likely you won't finish this article, because it's about death. You probably don't like to think about death, especially violent death. Hardly anybody does.

You may not read it, because it concerns civil defense. Quite possibly, you think civil defense is a bore, a lot of make-believe. Quite possibly, you think that if a bomb fell, civil defense wouldn't do any good anyway.

But in spite of this, we are publishing the article. Even if only a few people read it, the time may come when it will prove the most important thing they ever read.

The story begins when the first atomic bomb falls in the United States. Let's say it's ten o'clock on a January Tuesday in St. Louis, Missouri.

Workers are at work, children are at school, housewives are at home or at the market. The weather is cold and clear—no rain or snow predicted for the next few days. The winds in the upper air are from the southwest.

At exactly 10 A.M., an atomic bomb explodes a few hundred feet above the heart of the city. There is a searing flash of light; the earth itself shivers; the day seems to darken. In a split second, millions of dollars worth of buildings crumble to the ground; thousands of fires are instantly ignited; and between one breath and the next, a quarter of a million lives are snuffed out. Everybody you know may be dead.

The survivors—and there will be some survivors—open their eyes to a holocaust. Against a scene of incredible destruction and chaos, a scene of smoke and flame and heavy, choking dust, will be the wounded, the disfigured, the terribly burned, and the horribly bleeding. If, by some miracle, a survivor escapes unharmed, he will seem to be the only whole, uninjured person in the world.

*But the bomb has only begun its business.*

As soon as it has exploded, it forms a vast cloud, casting a twilight darkness over the entire city. This cloud gushes upward like a geyser

and shapes itself into a giant umbrella, which covers all St. Louis and casts a twilight pall over it.

The cloud is filled with tons and tons of particles—fragments of the bomb, billions of pieces of cement and wood from the exploded buildings, hundreds of thousands of pounds of displaced earth. And the nuclear reaction set off by the explosion *makes all this material radioactive*, each tiny particle giving off deadly rays.

When the cloud has reached an altitude of about 60,000 feet, it begins to move—on this particular Tuesday, in a northeasterly direction. Slowly, inexorably, it stretches out into a long cigar shape, extending its length hour by hour until it reaches for hundreds of miles. *And as it moves, it deposits the radioactive particles, in the form of fallout, over the entire area.*

By 10:30, just thirty minutes after the explosion, the farm land of a wide strip of western Illinois has been rendered deadly for crop and animal and human being.

By noon, Chicago's five million inhabitants are menaced by the creeping black cloud that started in St. Louis.

By sundown, Detroit and Cleveland are under the pall.

In these cities even outside the immediate target, death lies on the streets, filters through the windows, and hangs in the air. You can't see it, but you can see its effects—the bright red burns, the choked breathing, the retching of those who have come in contact with it.

If you happen to live anywhere within a five-hundred-mile radius of St. Louis on this cool, clear, hypothetical January Tuesday, you, too, will be facing death. No one—but no one—will be around to help you.

Your only hope of salvation is a *place to go*—a place to gather your family together, protected from the unseen rays; a place where it's safe to drink the water, to eat the food, to touch the objects around you, to breathe.

Once the bomb has exploded, there is no time to prepare such a place. Its walls and ceiling must be one to three feet thick; its windows, if any, must be completely shielded with layer on layer of bricks or sandbags. Even the door must be reinforced with cinder blocks, once you're inside.

Some provision *must* have been made for ventilation. Some provision *should* have been made for sanitation. There must be water, and food, and first-aid equipment. There must be a radio—a *battery* radio.

Even if there were time—and there won't be—to assemble all the supplies, they wouldn't be available. Where would you find 100 sand-

bags or 20 cinder blocks? How would you know—and in the midst of chaos who would tell you?—which method of ventilating is safe, which suicide?

So, once the bomb falls, you and your family have just one chance of survival—a shelter you have prepared in advance.

The length of time you will have to stay in the shelter will depend on a number of unpredictable factors—the winds, the weather, the exact amount of fallout, and the speed with which the “cleanup” operation progresses. It may be a few days if you're relatively far away from the larger area, or as long as two weeks if you're close by. You will be completely cut off from the world—unable to see even what is going on in the yard next door—except for reports and instructions broadcast over the emergency radio system, Conelrad (640 or 1240 kc.). From this source you will learn the intensity of the fallout in your area (trained and protected crews will measure it periodically during the emergency period) and will get your only news of the world outside. When the streets are once again safe, Conelrad will tell you, and will outline the precautions you should take as you emerge from the shelter.

All this may happen. You have the choice of believing that it can't. But if you recognize the possibility of war between major powers, you must go further and acknowledge that atomic bombs will be dropped. On us.

*No one can say where.* Perhaps St. Louis. Perhaps Dallas. Perhaps Boston. Perhaps twenty-five areas at once.

*No one can say when.* Wars are declared suddenly these days. These days they even begin *without* being declared. You *know*—you surely have been reading the newspapers.

This is to remember: if and when a single bomb falls within 200 to 500 miles of you, your survival depends on a shelter—and the shelter depends on you.

*- the imminence of war*