

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

# Duck & Cover: School Drills During the Cold War

By Jessica McBirney  
2016

*During the Cold War (a period of political tension that followed World War II), Americans feared that their enemy, the Soviet Union, might attack with a dangerous nuclear bomb. To prepare, the United States government took certain measures to prepare for that possibility. One of these steps involved having schoolchildren perform emergency "Duck and Cover" drills in which they proved they know how to react in the event of a nuclear attack. As you read, take notes on all of the factors that caused fear for people during this time.*

[1] Beginning in the 1950s, the United States and the Soviet Union (a socialist<sup>1</sup> country that was made up of what are now 15 different countries and that existed from 1922 to 1991) had a very tense relationship known as the Cold War. Although the Cold War never did escalate from tension to real violence between the two countries, people in the United States worried that the Soviets might attack with a nuclear bomb.<sup>2</sup> To prepare for such an event, elementary and high school students performed emergency drills at school, just as we might do fire or other safety drills today. The most common drill was called "Duck and Cover."



*"Bert2" by Wikipedia Public Domain is in the public domain.*

In a duck and cover drill, a student drops to the floor and gets under something, like a desk. Then they lie face-down, curl up, and cover the head and neck with a jacket, book, or even their hands. The goal of this drill was to protect against several dangerous side effects of a nuclear blast. The force of the explosion could create immense<sup>3</sup> amounts of heat. It could also cause windows to shatter. Keeping one's face on the floor could prevent burns and protect it from flying pieces of sharp glass.

The United States government worked hard to teach as many people about the duck and cover drill as possible. In 1951 they also released a short video, also titled "Duck and Cover," written for children in schools. This film featured a cartoon turtle named Bert, who ducked and covered whenever he saw a bright flash of light. Schools encouraged teachers to yell, "Drop!" in the middle of a lesson in order to see if students were prepared at any moment. Some cities even made small metal dog tags<sup>4</sup> for children to wear, so that they could be identified in case a bomb killed them.

1. A socialist country is one that follows socialism, a system in which everyone is supposed to have an equal opportunity to benefit from a country's wealth. Under socialism, the country's main industries are usually owned by the state.
2. A nuclear bomb is a type of weapon used in war that can create huge amounts of destruction, wiping out land for miles and miles and killing or harming thousands of people.
3. **Immense (adjective)** large
4. Dog tags were rectangular pieces of metal that were engraved with the wearer's name. Soldiers wore them around their necks during battle so they could be identified.

The government also wanted to help adults know what to do in an emergency. They released informational pamphlets that explained the duck and cover position and other strategies to survive a nuclear attack. They sent trucks around the country to show the videos and pass out booklets of information. Stores and magazines advertised bomb shelters that people could buy to put in their backyards. Cities set up public “fallout centers” where people could go to run away from atomic radiation,<sup>5</sup> and they also stored large amounts of food and installed emergency broadcast systems in public places. The federal government estimated<sup>6</sup> that all these efforts would save 27 million people.

- [5] Writers and scholars disagree about whether these programs were good or bad. Some say they promoted a healthy awareness of a real threat to the United States. Others say they gave people an unnecessary fear of crisis. School drills and other nuclear preparedness programs slowly went away in the 1960s, as U.S. leaders began to talk more openly with Soviet leaders.

© 2016. *Duck & Cover: School Drills During the Cold War* by CommonLit is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

---

5. Radiation is a dangerous, intense light-wave that comes from an atomic bomb. It can cause cancer.

6. **Estimate (verb)** to make an educated guess