

Cold War, Warm Hearth

by Elaine Tyler May



Family fallout shelter with 14-day food supply, radio, light sources, a two-week supply of water, and first aid, sanitary and other supplies and equipment, ca. 1957 (National Archives)

In the summer of 1959, a young couple married and spent their honeymoon in a fallout shelter. *Life* magazine featured the “sheltered honeymoon” with a photograph of the duo smiling on their lawn, surrounded by dozens of canned goods and supplies. Another photograph showed them kissing as they descended twelve feet underground into the 22-ton, steel and concrete, 8-by-11-foot shelter where they would spend the next two weeks. The article quipped that “fallout can be fun” and described the newlyweds’ adventure as fourteen days of “unbroken togetherness.” As the couple embarked on married life, all they had to enhance their honeymoon were some consumer goods and their privacy. This is a powerful image

of the nuclear family in the nuclear age: isolated, sexually charged, cushioned by abundance, and protected against impending doom by the wonders of modern technology.

The stunt was little more than a publicity device; yet, in retrospect it takes on symbolic significance. For in the early years of the Cold War, amid the uncertainties brought about by World War II and its aftermath, the home seemed to offer a secure private nest removed from the dangers of the outside world. The message was ambivalent, however, for the family also seemed particularly vulnerable. It needed heavy protection against the intrusions of forces outside itself. The self-contained home held out the promise of security in an insecure world. It also offered a vision of abundance and fulfillment. As the Cold War began, young postwar Americans were rushing into this vision of marriage and family life.

Demographic indicators show that in the period immediately following World War II, Americans were more eager than ever to establish families. The bomb-shelter honeymooners were part of a cohort of Americans of all racial, ethnic, and religious groups, of all socio-economic classes and education levels, who lowered the age at marriage for both men and women, and quickly brought the birthrate to a twentieth-century high after more than a hundred years of steady decline, producing the “baby boom.” Although the nation remained divided along lines of race and class, family fever swept the nation and affected all Americans. The trend of early marriage and relatively large families these young adults established lasted for more than two decades. From the 1940s through the early 1960s, Americans married at a higher rate and at a younger age than did their European counterparts.

Less noted but equally significant, the men and women who formed families between 1940 and 1960 also reduced the divorce rate after a postwar peak. Marriages forged in the late 1940s were particularly stable. Even those couples who eventually divorced remained together long enough to prevent the divorce rate from rising until the mid-1960s. Although the United States maintained its

dubious distinction of having the highest divorce rate in the world, the temporary decline in divorce did not occur to the same extent in Europe.

Why did postwar Americans turn to marriage and parenthood with such enthusiasm and commitment? Scholars frequently point to the family boom as the inevitable result of a return to peace and prosperity. They argue that postwar Americans were eager to put the disruptions and hardships of economic depression and war behind them and enjoy the abundance at home. There is, of course, some truth in this claim, but prosperity followed other wars in our history, notably World War I, with no similar increase in marriage and childbearing. Peace and affluence alone are inadequate to explain the many complexities of the postwar domestic explosion. The demographic trends went far beyond what was expected from a return to peace. Indeed, nothing on the surface of postwar America explains the rush of young Americans into marriage, parenthood, and traditional gender roles.

It might have been otherwise. The Great Depression of the 1930s brought about widespread challenges to traditional gender roles that could have led to a restructured home. The war intensified these challenges and pointed the way toward radical alterations in the institutions of work and family life. Wartime brought thousands of women into the paid labor force when men left to enter the Armed Forces. After the war, expanding job and educational opportunities, as well as the increasing availability of birth-control devices, might well have led young people to delay marriage or not marry at all, and to have fewer children if they did marry. Indeed, many observers at the time feared that these changes seriously threatened the stability of the American family. Yet, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that postwar American society experienced a surge in family life and a reaffirmation of domesticity that rested on distinct roles for women and men.

This demographic explosion in the American family represented a temporary disruption of long-term trends. It lasted only until the baby-boom children came of age. The parents, having grown up during the Depression and the war, had begun their families during years of prosperity. Their children, however, grew up amid affluence during the Cold War; they reached adulthood during the 1960s and 1970s, creating the counterculture and a new women's liberation movement. In vast numbers, they rejected the political assumptions of the Cold War, along with the domestic and sexual codes of their parents. This generation brought the twentieth-century birthrate to an all-time low and the divorce rate to an unprecedented high.

Observers often point to the 1950s as the last gasp of time-honored family life before the sixties generation made a major break from the past. But the comparison is shortsighted. In many ways, the youths of the sixties resembled their grandparents, who came of age in the first decades of the twentieth century. Like many of their baby-boom grandchildren, the grandparents had challenged the sexual norms of their day, pushed the divorce rate up and the birthrate down, and created a unique youth culture, complete with music, dancing, movies, and other new forms of amusements. They also behaved in similar ways politically, developing powerful feminist and civil rights movements, strong grassroots activism on behalf of social justice, and a proliferation of radical movements to challenge the status quo. It is the generation in between—with its strong domestic ideology, pervasive consensus politics, and peculiar demographic behavior—that stands out as different.

What makes the postwar demographic explosion even more curious and remarkable is its pervasiveness across all groups in the society. Americans of all backgrounds rushed into marriage and childbearing, even though many of these newly formed families—most notably large numbers of Americans of color—were excluded from suburbia, the site of the “American way of life.” Racial

and class divisions were concealed beneath an aura of unity in the aftermath of the war. Post-World War II America presented itself as a unified nation, politically harmonious and blessed with widespread affluence. Emerging triumphant from a war fought against racist and fascist regimes, spared the ravages of war-torn Europe and Asia, and prosperous from the booming wartime economy, the United States embraced its position as the “leader of the free world.”

But major challenges lay ahead if the nation was to maintain its leadership in the world. The atomic blasts that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki marked both the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War. The United States now faced its former ally, the Soviet Union, as its major foe. The Cold War was largely an ideological struggle between the two superpowers, both hoping to increase their power and influence across the globe. The divisions in American society along racial, class, and gender lines threatened to weaken the society at home and damage its prestige in the world. In the propaganda battles that permeated the era, American leaders promoted the American way of life as the triumph of capitalism, allegedly available to all who believed in its values. This way of life was characterized by affluence, located in suburbia, and epitomized by white middle-class nuclear families. Increasing numbers of Americans gained access to this domestic ideal—but not everyone who aspired to it could achieve it.

Poverty excluded many from suburban affluence; racism excluded others. Nevertheless, experts and officials insisted that the combined forces of democracy and prosperity would bring the fruits of the “good life” to all. Racial strife, they asserted, was diminishing. Workers, they argued, were prosperous. But anxieties surrounding these issues did not disappear. Policymakers perceived racial and class divisions as particularly dangerous, because dissatisfied workers and racial minorities might be drawn to left-wing political agitation, leading to socialism or even communism. According to the Cold War ethos of the time, conflict within the United States would harm our image abroad, strengthen the Soviet Union, and weaken the nation, making it vulnerable to communism. The worst-case scenario was Communist takeover and the defeat of the United States in the Cold War. Although strategists and foreign policy experts feared that the Soviet Union might gain the military strength and territorial expansion to achieve world domination, many leaders, pundits, and other observers worried that the real dangers to America were internal ones: racial strife, emancipated women, class conflict, and familial disruption.

To alleviate these fears, Americans turned to the family as a bastion of safety in an insecure world, while experts, leaders, and politicians promoted codes of conduct and enacted public policies that would bolster the American home. Like their leaders, most Americans agreed that family stability appeared to be the best bulwark against the dangers of the Cold War era. Because of the political, ideological, and institutional developments that converged at the time, young adults were especially eager for the comforts and security that the nuclear family promised. Like the young couple who honeymooned in the fallout shelter, postwar Americans set their sights on the affluent and protected home as the location of their own personal pursuit of happiness.

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