

## *See it Now*, the Atomic Drug Store and Las Vegas: At Home in the Cold War

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*This paper considers how See It Now, which set the standard for public affairs programs for decades, helped deliver this new kind of war into America's living rooms. Itself a product of the Cold War, See It Now offered viewers a novel way of engaging important social and political issues through intimate glimpses of other people's lives. The form resonated strongly with American television audiences in the 1950s; at the same time, it advanced the government's national security agenda and normalized the Cold War by drawing the front lines of that conflict through the American home.*

The day after 9/11, President George W. Bush declared “war” on terrorism, initiating a conflict without borders against an implacable, ideological enemy ostensibly bent on the total destruction of American values. To many Americans, especially many administration insiders, it sounded like Cold War II, a new war of ideas that tied American identity and the survival of democracy at home to its defense abroad. Americans would have to fight to defend their “way of life.” While the Cold War differs markedly from the war on terror in several significant respects,<sup>1</sup> it also continues to

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<sup>1</sup> John Tirman points out that although the Cold War was a “war of ideas” and military engagements, it also involved proxy wars and alliances and, most significantly, institutions for managing the conflict. Indeed, it was “a highly formalized affair ... dedicated to defusing potential conflict” that ended by “engagement rather than destroying the threat.” That contrasts with the Bush administration’s refusal to negotiate or even talk directly with the “enemy” at all. In addition, the Cold War was a state-centric conflict, in contrast, “al-Qaeda is nothing like a state,” Tirman says. “It is a cry against alleged Western mistreatment, rather than a successor system rooted in European philosophy (as was fascism and communism).” See John Tirman.

provide the cultural context and mechanisms through which the Bush administration attempts to influence public support for drawing the lines in this latest conflict, none more potent than television—one of the most effective weapons in the Cold War, in particular in establishing the home-front as the front line.

By the mid 1950s, many Americans had come to rely on television for information as well as entertainment. And none of those early information programs was more influential than *See It Now*, CBS's seminal public affairs show, which debuted in November 1951. When CBS launched *See It Now*, the *New Republic's* television critic hailed its co-creator, Edward R. Murrow, as "the most trustworthy reporter we have on the air today, the most responsible and the best able to project that responsibility" (Carson 1951: 21). Former colleague and biographer Alexander Kendrick elevated Murrow and *See It Now* even higher: "They were on the side of history, perhaps of the angels" (1969:3).

For many viewers, *See It Now* epitomized the uncompromising—and perhaps unattainable—standards of objectivity and fairness. Yet, it, too, was a product of the ideological Cold War and helped define the geography and boundaries of that conflict. In the early 1950s, nearly every genre of programming, from dramas to public affairs, promoted the ideals of individual freedom and self-fulfillment, centered in the home, which communism sought to destroy. *See It Now*, a newcomer experimenting with form in the new medium, offered viewers a novel way of engaging important social and political issues through intimate glimpses of other people's lives. Beginning with his World War II radio broadcasts, Murrow had insisted upon telling stories that linked the big picture to the individual or family. That form resonated strongly with American television audiences in the 1950s; at the same time, it advanced the government's national security agenda and normalized the Cold War by drawing the front lines of that conflict through the American home. Not only did this focus promote the nuclear family, it also, as Wendy Kozol points out, cultivated a trend toward privatization of issues (1994: 184), deflecting attention away from collective responsibility by situating solutions to systemic social, economic, and political problems within the family unit. Television, with its inclusion in the family circle, proved especially effective in aligning the benefits of privatization with national ideals, which was a primary goal of Cold War hawks. *See It Now* helped deliver this new kind of war into America's living rooms.

The background to the Cold War and the national security state it spawned lay in the postwar tensions between the United States and its former Soviet ally. In the hard-line American view, the Soviet Union actively promoted instability in Eastern Europe and Asia and had infiltrated U.S. government and corporate ranks in hopes of toppling the capitalist system. A string of crises beginning in early 1946 gradually forced President Harry S. Truman to craft both a diplomatic and a military response to the Cold War. In a televised speech before a joint session of Congress on March 12, 1947, Truman articulated a position that would guide U.S. diplomacy for the next forty years. The Truman Doctrine, as it came to be known, committed the United States to a policy supporting "free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" (Truman Papers 1947: n. pag.). Its main themes were containment

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and prevention of war with the Soviets, and its guiding principle was that modern war was total war, encompassing every aspect of life and demanding constant preparedness.

The threat of the spread of Soviet ideology in Europe and Asia coincided with an orchestrated campaign led by Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover and fanned by Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy, who claimed that “communist influences” had infiltrated the American airwaves. Cold War advocates exploited two events on the home front that reflected a growing public unease over the possibility of domestic communist infiltration. One occurred in 1947, when President Truman, in an attempt to weed out subversives, authorized a loyalty oath for all public employees. In essence, it permitted the government to dismiss any employee “if reasonable grounds exist for belief that the person involved is disloyal” (Truman Papers “Loyalty Oath” 1947: n. pag.). The other event played out over a two-year period. In 1948, Whitaker Chambers, a self-confessed communist and later a senior editor of *Time* magazine, accused Alger Hiss, president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and former New Dealer under President Roosevelt, of spying for the Soviets during the 1930s when he worked in the State Department. Chambers claimed that Hiss had passed secret government documents to him; after two trials and no evidence to support the allegation, Hiss was sentenced to five years in prison, not for spying but for perjury.

One of the first objectives of the Cold War hawks involved enlisting the support of a battle-weary civilian population to expand the nation’s defenses, including its atomic arsenal. Convincing the public of its merits would be difficult. Americans were tired of fighting and deprivation after 15 years of war and Depression, and public opinion surveys showed little national will to become involved in, let alone understand, the complexities of Cold War. According to public opinion poll data from 1948-1951 tracked by political scientist George Quester, few Americans favored U.S. action on the global stage, and although communism may have presented a threat, it seemed to be an abstract menace (1978-79: 656). The polls show a marked reluctance to embrace the idea of Cold War: in 1948, only 15 percent of the population surveyed believed Russia was “winning the cold war.” By 1951, however, the number had doubled (Quester 1978-79: 656), reflecting the growing apprehension connected to a string of Soviet actions and the onset of the Korean War.

Fear of Russian intentions changed radically in the summer of 1949 when the Soviet Union detonated a nuclear weapon. Many in government agreed with Senator McCarthy that the Russians could not have succeeded without access to American atomic secrets. Witnesses called before the Senate Committee on Government Operations and its Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, led by McCarthy, seemed to testify to a creeping communist conspiracy at all levels of society, one that undermined the very values upon which the nation stood. In the end, McCarthy’s histrionics served the ends of national-security-state building, as the public acquiesced in the need to prepare for total war to stave off the Soviet threat to the American way of life.

A primary issue for Cold War hawks was how to prepare Americans to resist Soviet expansion; officials worried mainly about the emotional stability of the population if faced with a nuclear attack (Oakes 1994: 21). In the end, they framed national security as a contest between competing systems: the democratic values of the United States, which emphasized the inseparability of security and liberty, versus Soviet totalitarianism

and expansionism, which sought world domination and the overthrow of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Embedded in the discourse of security was the threat of nuclear annihilation and the need for constant vigilance; liberty contained the traditional cultural narratives of private property, individualism, and the moral superiority of American democracy. By the time President Truman created the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) in December 1950, a clear line connected the national will to resist with national security. The solution was “emotion management” through an active public relations and advertising campaign aimed at controlling fear of attack by promoting civil defense, with the home as the first line of defense. The plan involved teaching citizens about nuclear weapons by instilling a set of “appropriate responses” in the event of attack, including techniques Americans could use “to control their emotions” (Oakes 1994: 47). Television became the preferred medium for delivering the twin messages of Soviet expansionism and the winnability of a nuclear attack directly into the American living room (Oakes 1994: 21-22).

Sociologist Jackie Orr argues that the foundations of the national security rest in part on the deliberate cultivation of insecurity and terror within the civilian population. This “militarization of inner space” involves civil society in the production and incorporation of violence into everyday life (2004:451-456). Civil defense as articulated in the Cold War encompassed the whole society in the preparation for nuclear war through an all-out propaganda effort and a national security strategy in which military ideas, values, and structures infiltrated homes, schools, and businesses (McEnaney 2000:6). Lawmakers faced a balancing act: on one side, trying to reconcile security needs against fears of military rule; on the other, confronting the financial impossibility of defending the civilian population against nuclear attack. These conflicting values led, historian Laura McEnaney argues, to the privatization of civil defense and the emergence of the self-help model, which shifted the financial burden from the government to the individual (2000: 7). Civil defense became a personal matter, a housekeeping issue conveyed to homemakers through the language and institutions of domesticity, including popular women’s magazines and television (McEnaney 2000:8).

As one of its first acts, the Federal Civil Defense Administration in March 1951 formed a partnership with the Advertising Council, which quickly began experimenting with a variety of propaganda tools, from pamphlets to staged mock drills (McEnaney 2000: 35). In addition, the FCDA produced articles for print media and programs for broadcasters.<sup>3</sup> Broadcast networks featured thousands of hours of civil defense programming. *Survival*, a seven-part series produced by the FCDA, aired on the NBC television network in July and August 1951, and CBS ran the special, *Defense of the Nation*, featuring popular TV personality Arthur Godfrey as emcee. In fact, most government agencies produced programming for the nascent television networks. Historian Nancy Bernhard documents some of the 528 film titles produced by the Department of Defense, the most sensational of which concerned nuclear war and what

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<sup>2</sup> Todd Gitlin defines frames as persistent patterns of interpretation and presentation of specific issues or events (1979:12). As he points out, television sustains these frames through selection and exclusion, emphasizing and organizing the verbal and visual discourses that shape how a given society understands those issues.

<sup>3</sup> McEnaney reports that in 1951 alone more than two thousand newspapers nationwide ran a twelve-part series on civil defense written by FCDA staff (2000:35).

ordinary Americans should do in the event of an atom bomb blast (1999: 139-143). Such cooperation blurred the lines between government propaganda and an independent press, but as McEnaney points out, the media found themselves in an awkward position (2000: 36). Access to sensitive information about the nation's nuclear arsenal and its military plans was tightly controlled. If journalists wanted to report on these issues, they had to toe the line. In addition, television executives were acutely sensitive to loyalty claims made by *Red Channels*, a publication by three former FBI agents claiming that the nation's entertainment industries—film, radio, and television—were paving the way for the eventual communist domination of American broadcasting. McCarthy amplified the message with his assertions that communists had infiltrated every level of their industry. For broadcasters, demonstrating their readiness to partner with and transmit the messages of civil defense was the patriotic thing to do.

Even in its relatively infant state, television influenced audiences. Because of its essential domesticity and its adaptation to the intimacies of family life, the medium quickly became part of the daily routine, its programs available on predictable days, crafted to appeal to the tastes of probable viewers at given times. The series format, with its regular host, title, and theme music, offered more than familiarity, it generated trust and pleasure. TV's intimacy allowed program presenters, like Murrow, to establish a more informal relationship with audiences through direct eye contact and colloquial language, including the use of pronouns, which seem to align narrator and viewer as allies (Corner 1991: 32). Television, thus, was the ideal medium for spreading what historian Philip Oakes characterizes as the “rules of nuclear household care” (1994:120). Films made for television by the FCDA, such as *This is Your Civil Defense* and *Facts About Fallout*, linked personal responsibility to national security. In these films, the Soviets were ruthless opponents intent on overthrowing the United States by any means possible, from nuclear attack to subversion. The underlying message warned Americans that the scope of the threat meant the military could not guarantee their safety; instead, citizens should be prepared to defend their own homes and communities. While threatening, the films simultaneously reassured Americans that a nuclear attack was survivable, if they followed a few simple rules. As Oakes observes, these films reduced fallout to a matter of hygiene, characterizing it as an “uncommonly troublesome form of household dirt” that could be removed by thorough cleaning (1994:122).

*See It Now* devoted several segments during its first two seasons to nuclear energy issues. Murrow emphasized fact-based reporting, coupled with Americans' deeply held belief in the future and individual autonomy; the episodes generally focused attention on personal or domestic narratives, interwoven with the threads of militarization, containment, and expertise. Ultimately, *See It Now* created a way of seeing that addressed American anxieties by framing them within domestic narratives, a form prevalent in American media coverage of the current Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts.

One segment, which aired in January 1952, featured an inside look at the Oakridge, Tennessee, atomic pile. It opens with Murrow, narrating over a close-up of a glass beaker of fluid gripped by a mechanical arm:

It always surprises us that we spend so much time talking about the wartime uses of atomic energy and so little about its peacetime uses. For example, the A-bomb and this glass of radioactive iodine have much in common. Both the atomic bomb and the liquid were born at Oakridge,

Tennessee. Each is part of what American taxpayers are getting for the billions spent on atomic energy.

The camera pulls back to reveal a concrete wall of holes tended by technicians shifting long metal rods from one hole to another. Murrow explains in some detail the technical specifications of the atomic pile and how its reactions are contained. Then he selects a single slot, “hole number 1769,” which becomes the focus of attention. Over 50 days, scientific know-how will convert the raw uranium in 1769 into radioactive iodine. This pile, Murrow tells viewers, is “the Oakridge atomic drug store.” Both narration and images direct attention to the mechanics of the process, emphasizing the danger of the materials—they’re too “hot” for human hands, thus the mechanical arms that move the vials around—and the expertise involved, as scientists in white lab coats monitor gauges and dials and manipulate the radioactive material.

Finally, “our bottle” passes a Geiger counter to “determine the radioactivity the consumer will be exposed to” before it is placed in a lead-lined box and loaded onto a plane. “Next stop, hospitals throughout the country,” Murrow says reassuringly. In the end, he strips this fearsome material of its destructive power: the danger lies in its manufacture and handling rather than its uses. Radioactive uranium is reduced to an item available from the neighborhood drug store and used in hospitals, where it will cure rather than destroy. Its application in nuclear weapons is ignored after the opening narration. As with other episodes dealing with atomic energy, Murrow tames it by wrapping it in the language of domesticity and containment.

Containment defined the national security objective—secure borders and clearly delineated spheres of influence—which television transferred to the home-front by reinforcing the centrality of domesticity in the fight against subversive tendencies. Elaine Tyler May points out that security through containment was the common thread linking Cold War ideology and the domestic revival that permeated postwar American culture, encouraging private solutions to social problems (1988: 208). Containment relied on personal responsibility in the home rather than government actions. At the same time, domestic narratives deflect attention from the underlying contradiction of a national security state that is the responsibility of the individual by focusing on the family that is to be protected and preserved. Murrow subtly accomplishes that in the Oakridge segment by emphasizing how the pernicious effects of atomic energy are contained (and containable), through vigilance and responsibility.

An April 1952 segment prosaically presents an atomic test at Yucca Flats, 22 miles from Las Vegas, avoiding any discussion of the economic, social, or political implications by focusing on the personal actions of a squad of soldiers and the guests invited to watch it. No one burrows deeply underground or wears special protective clothing; instead, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission had designed this A-bomb test to determine how people positioned four miles from the blast would react under various conditions. Murrow introduces the segment by noting that one legacy of the nuclear era is an ongoing discussion about “push-button warfare [and] the place old-fashioned ground troops would play in atomic warfare, which takes center stage in this story.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Carol Ahlgen and Mark Edgerton Martin trace a similar “scientific experiment” conducted during the Cold War. The Federal Civil Defense Administration and the Atomic Energy Commission jointly constructed “Survival City” at Yucca Flats in 1955. It consisted of 10 houses, some brick, some cinderblock, some wood-frame ramblers, located from seven-tenths to three and a half miles from ground

Joe Wershba, the CBS reporter who narrates, begins the segment in Las Vegas, the staging area for 2,000 troops and 200 reporters. Las Vegas, he tells viewers, is “a rowdy, honky-tonk town, an escape route to California, wide-open and handsome only at night.” The camera supports this claim, inter-cutting vistas of gritty sagebrush and cactus with the city’s neon nightscape. But, says Wershba, the nearby Yucca Flats testing ground “blasted” this “citadel of the escapists into the front page and the realization that there’s no escape from the atomic age.” The camera cuts to shots of gaming tables and sophisticated women sipping cocktails, identified by a bartender as “the Flamingo Atom Bomb.” Adding to the usual mix in Las Vegas this week are “almost as many newsmen . . . as there were rude troops around that colonial bridge at Concord,” Wershba tells the audience. Images of casinos give way to shots of a fleet of buses carrying reporters to Camp Mercury, the staging area for the test.

The segment next focuses on military preparation, with shots of soldiers filing into sandy trenches and foxholes three-and-a-half miles from ground zero. In typical *See It Now* fashion, Wershba selects a nine-man squad, “sufficiently distant from the blast to remain above the ground,” and follows them down into a shallow trench. The film cuts back and forth between the squad and an enormous bull’s eye painted on the desert floor, as a voice over a loudspeaker counts down the minutes to detonation and Wershba delivers play-by-play commentary on the B-50 bomber’s progress toward the site. The voice counts “five-four-three-two-one,” and the squad leader yells at his troops: “Turn around now, turn now!” They turn toward the camera, heads down, and the film cuts to a long shot of the blast ball of fire and dust cloud.

The final segment shifts to debriefing sessions with some of the soldiers in Wershba’s squad. The questions concern how the soldiers felt when the bomb detonated and how they reacted. One admits he was “kind of under a strain and scared pretty bad at first. I wouldn’t want to be in another like that,” a sentiment echoed by another, who when asked if he would ever want to be any closer said: “No sir. I wouldn’t. That was too close to be.” The camera focuses on each man’s face but moves into a tight close-up for the final comment: “I don’t see how anything so beautiful can be so destructive,” that soldier says. The live studio camera cuts to Murrow, his characteristic cigarette curling a halo of smoke, silhouetted against a bank of monitors, looking straight at the audience: “And to that report we can add nothing.”

The narration by Wershba and Murrow constructs both a blatant and a subtle civil defense message. The purpose of this particular test, as the military briefers attest, is to assess how people nearby will react and what effect training has on their actions. One bit of film shows crews setting up bulky television cameras on “News Nob,” and Wershba comments that “someone said the blast would burn out the tube on a TV camera.” Although the focus is on the troops, the hundred-plus guests—including government officials, businessmen and military officers—invited to witness the blast are shown sitting casually on metal folding chairs, as if attending a picnic or rally, protected only by

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zero. Ahlgen and Martin report that for a few weeks before the explosion Survival City was a point of great interest to the news media and citizens. The streets were named, and each was filled with period furniture, utensils, food and mannequin families. The *Today* show, an innovation on NBC, sent Dave Garroway to the site, and some 450 journalists crowded onto News Nob on the day of the blast, which was televised live on CBS and NBC. Ahlgen and Martin argue that Survival City was built to dispel civilian fears about nuclear technology by integrating survival into the very fabric of home and neighborhood. See Ahlgen and Martin 1989: 26-28.

their extra-dark sunglasses. The casualness of attire and setting reduces the political implications of an atomic bomb to a local community meeting and avoids any hint of the enormous cost of constructing such a weapon or the purpose for which it was built. Rather, the narrative directs attention to following orders, implying that if people know what to do, they can survive, even in unprotected places relatively close to the blast. If Wershba had focused only on the preparations for test and the 2,000 soldiers involved, viewers might have received a different message, centered on military training and strength. Instead, he begins by domesticating atomic power, linking it to the lights and gaiety of Las Vegas where patrons sip Flamingo Atom Bombs and play the slots.

On the bus to the site, journalists pass a checkpoint warning of the danger of loose talk, establishing one of the ground rules of the national security state: there are some things so secret even the American people can't be told. But shots of reporters and cameramen jockeying for an ideal spot from which to witness the blast effectively reassure viewers that the government is not concealing very much. To reinforce the idea of journalistic independence, Wershba tells viewers watching the bus caravan to Camp Mercury that "taxpayers pay only for the bombs and the troops, the bus ride costs \$22 roundtrip." This is a key message, for it was upon the public perception of an objective and free press that Americans pinned their notion of liberty. Finally, what the comment from the last soldier (and Murrow) emphasize is aesthetics; the beauty of destruction. This may be a weapon of immense destructive power, but it also is controllable enough to be something of a mascot to nearby Las Vegas, where people go to escape and enjoy life. By contextualizing the site and the test within the parameters of pleasure and emphasizing the ordinary ways in which people may protect themselves – just turning away or donning sun glasses (how cool!) – the episode domesticated the fearsomeness of the atom.

*See It Now* helped frame the ideology of atomic energy that prevailed during the 1950s and 1960s, selecting and organizing the verbal and visual discourses that shaped the public's understanding of it. Simply being present at an atom bomb test and taking pictures of it reassured Americans of its survivability. Seeing scientists working with the atomic pile in Oakridge, its bland wall of holes striking an unthreatening note, attested to a benign quality reinforced by Murrow's description of its "atomic drugstore."

The Cold War culture, carefully crafted by national security advocates, helped create the conditions for consensus about the nation's foreign policy objectives and practices among the media elite. Cold War advocates solicited help from Madison Avenue advertising firms and enlisted major manufacturers of household products to help sell the preparedness message of civil defense. Even the much-honored *See It Now*, itself a product of Cold War culture, played a role in the domestication of militarization by focusing on "little pictures" of "little people" caught up in events, showing audiences how individuals, not government, could and did solve their own problems. The home-front effectively became the front line in that war, which has ramifications in the way Americans perceive their relationship to government and other institutions today. The unspoken assumptions and inferences visible in the domestic arrangement, the focus on the small story within the big event, link directly to the American ideology of individual freedom and self-fulfillment, centered in the home, as core American beliefs. In the 1950s, those values were threatened by communists; today it is religious extremists.

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