



Shop Till You Drop?

Jeremy Lott

In a televised speech on July 25, 1961, President John F. Kennedy warned Americans that relations between the United States and the Soviet Union had taken a truly dangerous turn. He spoke of vague “sacrifices” and “burdens” that the American people might have to accept to secure the “freedom of human beings” everywhere.

Then he stopped beating around the bush and really said something: “We have [the] sobering responsibility to recognize the possibilities of nuclear war.” Even if it came to that awful event, Kennedy hoped that all would not be lost, because “the families that are not hit in a nuclear blast and fire can still be saved, if they can be warned to take shelter, and if that shelter is available.”

To many Americans, that was at least one “if” too many. What Kennedy had in mind was a coordinated public effort to build or fortify existing shelters, and to stock them with emergency supplies. The worries—verging on panic—that his speech provoked, however, created overnight a new market in backyard

bomb shelters. *Life* magazine ran a cover story about fallout shelters that used a mushroom cloud to really drive the point home. The article promised that you, the reader, “could be among the 97 percent to survive if you follow the advice on these pages.” Or you could put the magazine back on the news rack and die a horrible, radiated, agonizing death.

The fallout shelter proved so popular an idea that the Kennedy administration tried to jump on the bandwagon the president had inadvertently set rolling. Kennedy had promised the American people a pamphlet giving them some notion of what to do to prepare for nuclear strikes. The

Shopping Our Way to Safety: How We Changed from Protecting the Environment to Protecting Ourselves

By Andrew Szasz

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first draft included plans for building shelters or taking boats out to sea for a few weeks to let things cool down. When John Kenneth Galbraith, then the ambassador to India, eyeballed the draft, his blood boiled. In a scathing memo to Kennedy, Galbraith wrote that the pamphlet “is a design for saving Republicans and sacrificing Democrats... I think it particularly injurious, in fact it is absolutely incredible, to have a family with a

cabin cruiser saving itself by going out to sea. Very few members of the [United Auto Workers] can go with them.”

Galbraith’s criticism was in the spirit of that old jab at how *New York Times* headline writers would frame an imminent *Armageddon*-like meteor strike: “World to end: Women, minorities hardest hit.” But while some liberals were viewing fallout shelters through the lens of class, many Americans were mulling more Hobbesian considerations: *Say we take our would-have-been vacation money and build a shelter with it, and the Smiths down the street, who went to Disneyland instead, come knocking on the sealed door when the big one drops. Should we let them in? And what to do if they try to force their way in?*

In the Jesuit journal *America*, one theologian considered the question of how the Prince of Peace might weigh “the pros and cons of gunning one’s neighbor at the shelter door.” He decided that pulling the trigger was consistent with “sound Christian morality.” Many Americans kept construction of their shelters under wraps, so that they would not be forced to make such an awful choice if it came to that.

The 1964 movie *Dr. Strangelove* best satirized the high-stakes diplomacy of the Cold War, but the bomb shelter boom didn’t really get its due until the Hugh Wilson-directed movie *Blast from the Past*

(1999). In that film, Dr. Calvin Webber (played by Christopher Walken) is an eccentric but brilliant scientist who secretly constructs a grand shelter in his Los Angeles backyard that’s designed to sustain his embryonic family not for weeks but decades. During one scare, Calvin hurries his very pregnant wife Helen (Sissy Spacek) into the shelter. No nuclear blast occurs, but the house does go up in a ball of flame (the result of a wholly coincidental plane crash), and the Webbers are sealed in for thirty-five years.

The movie pokes fun at Calvin for his paranoia—but not too much fun. After all, it saved his family’s bacon. The real scorn is reserved for the world above, for the changes it undergoes over three and a half decades. The Webbers’ house was part of a neighborhood that was replaced by businesses as suburbanites fled to the exurbs, and then run down to the point of slumminess. When Calvin returns to the surface, he finds a shuttered, disgusting bar where his house used to stand, is propositioned by a transsexual hooker, and tries to take refuge in what turns out to be the friendly neighborhood porn shop.

Convinced that this post-blast world has been overrun by “mutants,” Calvin just wants to secure necessary supplies and seal his family back in. Even at the end of the film, when his son Adam (Brendan Fraser) has had an exact replica of the old family home recreated, far from urban or

even suburban decay, we see Calvin leisurely pacing out the dimensions of another bomb shelter in the backyard.

Wilson's film raises themes that University of California, Santa Cruz, sociologist Andrew Szasz emphasizes in his new book *Shopping Our Way to Safety*. But where *Blast from the Past* sees paranoid self-reliance as funny or harmless or even laudable, Szasz sees something utterly ominous. The first section of the book uses the fall-out panic and suburbanization (and exurbanization) as evidence in his case against what Szasz dubs "inverted quarantines."

He literally apologizes for the clunky coinage; he couldn't find anything else quite up to the job. A quarantine is the isolating of diseased, or potentially diseased, individuals, animals, or items to keep illness from spreading. An inverted quarantine works the other way around: when a problem becomes too big to be isolated, we find some way of isolating *ourselves* from it.

We built bomb shelters to try to ward off certain doom. We move to the suburbs and exurbs and gated communities to avoid high taxes and high crime. We drink bottled water and install filters because we don't trust that the water coming out of the tap will be pollutant-free. Rather than dealing with these threats directly, we "commodify" them, Szasz argues, and he thinks that's entirely to the bad. In response to the potential

threat of the Y2K bug (remember that?) some folks "went into survivalist mode, stocked up on freeze-dried food, bottled water and water purifiers, and medical supplies, and went out and bought a generator." Following the September 11 attacks, some Americans had "safe rooms" constructed in their homes to isolate themselves from biological weapons, a few even had underground backyard shelters built, and there were runs on bottled water and guns.

Of Szasz's several arguments against inverted quarantines, the two most salient are, first, that these quarantines don't always work, and second, that inverted quarantines have replaced public spiritedness. It used to be that people could be moved to activism on behalf of various safety- and environment-related causes, but, Szasz laments, now we try to shop our way out of them.

He has a point with the second argument, at least superficially. Nowadays, we can buy a Prius or another gas-saving hybrid; swap our old incandescent light bulbs for more energy-efficient compact fluorescents; pick out organic tomatoes, free-range chicken, and non-hormone-treated beef; and call it a day. If we're still feeling guilty, we can purchase carbon offsets, the modern secular equivalent of the medieval sale of indulgences. As the consumer-conscious environmental glossy magazine *Plenty* puts it, "It's easy being green."

Szasz thinks that it should be harder to be green—much, much harder. Critics should attack, and consumers should abandon, all inverted quarantine measures. They should pursue instead collective solutions to pollution, global warming, and other threats that he takes to be extremely serious and growing. He closes the book on a sour note, saying that Americans' almost reflexive response to all such threats these days is to try to shop their way out of them, and that things are thus likely to get worse before they get better, if recovery is possible at all.

It is to Szasz's great credit that he lays out the facts honestly and thoroughly enough to undermine his own arguments. He believes that Americans contemplated the inverted quarantine approach to nuclear war but then pulled back because only hundreds of thousands and not millions of people had shelters constructed.

First, that may understate the true figure, because many people, like our fictional Dr. Calvin Webber, constructed shelters in secret. Second, Szasz considers many of the arms-control agreements that the United States and the Soviet Union signed to be the result of the rejection of the inverted quarantine. Some of those agreements, however, were not all that favorable to the Soviet Union. It's just as likely that the Russians were spooked to learn that the response of a great number of

Americans to nuclear war was, *Go right ahead. I'll be in the backyard.*

In his attacks on suburbia and exurbia, Szasz is right that people were trying to protect themselves and their families from criminal threats (and, let's not forget, sky-high urban taxes) and that those who couldn't escape the cities initially had a much worse time of it. But most of the big cities eventually improved, and some have even managed to lure families back. One big reason for that improvement was that cities learned that they couldn't take it for granted that people would stick around.

Szasz points also to the worldwide restrictions on the use of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) as one place where his pessimism inexplicably wasn't borne out. When the ozone layer at the North and South poles started thinning dangerously in the 1970s and 1980s, many predicted it would destroy entire food chains in both regions. If Szasz's way of thinking were right, governments would have done nothing. After all, major public health campaigns were underway to get people to use sun block—an inverted quarantine device—to fight skin cancer. Governments would just ratchet up the campaign and let the poles burn, surely. In fact, however, governments greatly restricted the use of CFCs, and even though ozone depletion remains a problem, the food chains seem to have stayed relatively intact.

Over and over again, Szasz seriously undervalues the actions of individual

decision-makers and overvalues the ability of legislators and regulators to solve our problems. He argues that way because he must—he is living in an “either/or” world: either you buy into the logic of the inverted quarantine, or you care about the world around you. It’s a deeply flawed analysis, of course, but Szasz’s writing, research, and sto-

rytelling are good enough that most readers from the land of “both/and” will still enjoy his book.

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