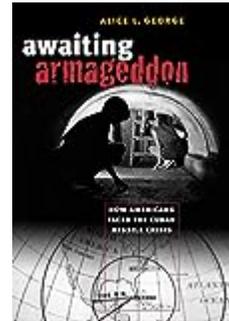




Alice L. George. *Awaiting Armageddon: How Americans Faced the Cuban Missile Crisis.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. xxiii+ 238 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2828-1.



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The Day After

In *Awaiting Armageddon*, Alice L. George examines the domestic impact in the United States of the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962, drawing mainly upon primary material from the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidential libraries, the National Archives, and the Library of Congress. A former journalist, she has augmented these sources by using a range of national, state, and local newspapers and by conducting personal interviews.

To provide context, George begins with a brisk chronological account of the crisis. She then examines the United States's civil defense preparations for nuclear war. In such an event, the President, his Cabinet, and the Supreme Court justices could find shelter in Mount Weather, a massive underground complex, 48 miles from Washington, lavishly equipped with offices, a hospital, dining and recreation areas, and sleeping quarters. Congressmen had the benefit of their own bunker, located in West Virginia. Inevitably, the general public was not so well served, because in the 1950s neither the Eisenhower administration nor Congress had shown much zeal for a major outlay for civil defense. Planning was also haphaz-

ard at the state and local levels.

As a result of the Berlin crisis of 1961, the Kennedy administration increased spending on public shelters, but support for civil defense measures declined soon after. By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, existing shelters could only house about 60 million people—about a third of the population. Later, federal authorities decided to lower the standard for what constituted adequate “shelter” from the effects of radiation. Although this “doubled” the amount of protection for the general population, the measure was, in George’s words, a mere “sleight of hand maneuver” that obviously did little for people’s safety (p. 67).

George argues that the government’s limited ability to provide the population’s most basic survival needs led some citizens to respond to the threat of nuclear war with sheer panic, clearing retailers’ shelves of bottled water, food, guns, and transistor radios. In the absence of adequate shelter provision, some city-dwellers responded by traveling to relatively safe, rural areas. Others refused to allow events to intrude on their daily lives, either out of conviction that nuclear war would not come or because

they thought that any means of preparation was simply an act of futility.

George also scrutinizes the Kennedy administration's handling of the media. The administration strove to balance freedom of the press with the need to safeguard national security. While officials sometimes used excessive power to curb press freedom, journalists' own preoccupation with national security led many of them to fall in, all too readily, with the official line, thereby serving as a mere "conduit for Cold War dogma" and as "proliferators of selectively disclosed information" (p. 94). But on occasions the administration's conduct was heavy-handed. As a consequence, the phrase "news management" entered the vernacular and contributed to the emergence of an increasingly skeptical media during the 1960s and beyond.

Beyond the domestic-political dimension of the crisis, George examines the effects upon the nation's children and young adults. While she finds the impact on the former fragmentary and hard to quantify, the impact on the latter is easier to measure, in the sense that "the demonstrations of the missile crisis period" planted "some of the seeds for the peace movement ... in the late 1960s" (p. 163).

The gist of *Awaiting Armageddon* is that the domestic experience of the Cuban Missile Crisis represented

"an often overlooked national passage that almost certainly contributed to changes in the American mind," and helped foster the growing social and political instability that would reach a crescendo in the late 1960s (p. 169). The emphasis on the longer-term as well as the more immediate results of the crisis deserves commendation. The focus on the domestic effects of the crisis, rather than the more customary diplomatic and strategic dimensions of the episode, is refreshing and original. Certainly, it resonates with our current preoccupations with homeland security. George writes clearly and economically, and her research is comprehensive.

The book has one relatively minor deficiency: It is that when George deals with the international and foreign policy context of the Cuban Crisis, her arguments are often simplistic and tend toward hyperbole. For example, she stresses how the "blinding fear of communism as an insidious and monolithic menace to freedom heightened the threat of war" (p. 3). In light of the increasingly evident tensions between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China in the early 1960s, American policymakers had, for some time, become less and less inclined to see international communism as a monolith. This is, however, only a minor criticism. On the whole, *Awaiting Armageddon* is an important and eminently readable book for anyone with an interest in the Cuban Missile Crisis or in the United States of the early 1960s.

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