

NUCLEAR DETERRENCE, DEMOCRACY, AND THE COLD WAR IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *THE NUCLEAR AGE*

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I

The Nuclear Age is the story of 49-year-old William Cowling, a man who has lived his life under the looming threat of a nuclear war. The author Tim O'Brien describes the novel's two main themes: "[H]ow and why we become politicized and depoliticized" and "the safety of our species, our survival. We won't survive if we can't stop thinking of nuclear weapons as mere metaphors" (McCaffery 141). In this novel, O'Brien is concerned with an excessive sense of helplessness in the public, or more specifically, a crisis of democracy in the nuclear politics of the United States. Critic Daniel Cordle is correct when he says, "*The Nuclear Age* is particularly significant because it makes obsession with this constantly threatened but deferred possibility the overriding focus of the narrative" (104). He suggests that the narratives of the nuclear thriller genre remove the nuclear threat through the heroic actions of the central protagonist. In addition, most of the nuclear disaster narratives represent a nuclear war or its aftermath, and thus the plots do not remain in suspense. However, he does not regard the novel's "focus on the psychological impact of the long, drawn-out nuclear suspense" as critique of nuclear deterrence theory (105).

This paper aims to analyze how *The Nuclear Age* problematizes U.S. politics based on the logic of nuclear deterrence theory. Under nuclear deterrence theory, it is only a small number of people in the highest reaches of government who can make the ultimate decision to use atomic and hydrogen weapons. Without any say in the matter at all, the general public has to passively tolerate the prospect of a nuclear apocalypse. Thus the novel chronicles the subversion of democracy and its psychological impact on the characters under the logic of nuclear deterrence.

II

O'Brien's novel was published in 1985, but he placed the setting ten years ahead of time, and so the protagonist William narrates the story from the year 1995. Although the real Cold War ended with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, in the 1995 of *The Nuclear Age* the Cold War is still ongoing. The novel consists of alternating episodes: the story moves back and forth from the present to the past. Throughout the present-time chapters, in the midst of a family breakup, William digs a nuclear shelter in the backyard of his home, located in the Sweetheart Mountains near Fort Derry, Montana. The flashback chapters detail William's fear of nuclear war, all the way from his youth in the 1950's to his middle age in 1995. These

episodes illustrate the nuclear anxiety of William's childhood, college years and adult life. His fear is demonstrated by his obsession with a Ping-Pong table in the basement of his parent's house, where he hid to stave off his mounting nuclear panic:

When I was a kid, about Melinda's age, I converted my Ping-Pong table into a fallout shelter. Funny? Poignant? A nifty comment on the modern age? Well, let me tell you something. The year was 1958, and I was scared. Who knows how it started? Maybe it was all that CONELRAD stuff on the radio, tests of the Emergency Broadcast System, pictures of H-bombs in *Life* magazine, strontium 90 in the milk, the times in school when we'd crawl under our desks and cover our heads in practice for the real thing. (9)

The nuclear fear among American citizens was intensified in the 1950's, when they were frequently warned of the possibility of a nuclear war. These warnings came through a variety of media: journalism; studies and statements by scientists; official bulletins, pamphlets, and footage; and civil defense drills. What is apparent in the quotation above is that the exact nature of U.S. civil defense, which is symbolized by young William's quasi-shelter, is unspecified. It is worthwhile examining what William's fallout shelter symbolizes, by looking into the history of civil defense policy, U.S. official publicity about radioactivity, and scientists' concern about residual radiation.

Throughout the Cold War years there was a remarkable polarization in the estimation of the nuclear danger by scientists, journalists, and the American government. While some scientists and journalists attempted to warn the world of the unprecedented dangers of nuclear bombs, the U.S. officials sought to understate these hazards. Guy Oakes indicates that the government sought the citizens' acceptance of, and cooperation on, the national security policy and the idea of nuclear deterrence, in order to maintain U.S. hegemonic power in postwar international relations. Thus, the government assertively publicized "a full and frank account of the facts of nuclear war and the prospects for survival" and tried to "convince the public that the impact of nuclear war on the American home front would be bearable" (167). It was necessary for the government to train citizens to "suppress an irrational terror of nuclear war and foster in its stead a more pragmatic nuclear fear. [. . .] Properly channeled, nuclear fear would motivate the public to deliver the support regarded as essential to [nuclear] deterrence" (33). The following serves as an example of official U.S. strategies:

[I]n January 1951, shortly before the FCDA [Federal Civil Defense Administration] became operational, the Office of Civil Defense in the NSRB [National Security Resources Board] produced a remarkable little booklet, *Survival Under Atomic Attack*. Although its original printing was limited to 225,000 copies, within a year more than 20 million copies were in circulation.⁴¹ The booklet's main contention was that the dangers of nuclear attack had been widely exaggerated; actually they could be survived without difficulty. [. . .] In an effort to blunt the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons, *Survival Under Atomic Attack* also attempted to diminish the dangers of radioactivity. (Oakes 52-53)

In fact, the concrete effects of radiation from atomic weapons on the general American citizenry remained unspecified until 1990, when the United States Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA) was enacted. This federal statute provided for the monetary compensation to individuals who contracted certain cancers and other specified diseases as a result of their

exposure to radiation released during the atmospheric nuclear testing undertaken by the United States during the Cold War, or their occupational exposure to radiation while employed in the uranium industry during the Cold War arsenal buildup.¹ Until the enactment of RECA, there were thousands of uncompensated complaints of ailments possibly caused by radiation from the nuclear bomb and uranium industries.²

The United States' minimization of the impact of nuclear bombs had been in place since the atomic-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The health effects of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were covered up by the U.S. information control. However, soon after the atomic bombing, journalists from different countries reported outbreaks of sickness in Hiroshima, which they attributed to residual radiation. Wilfred Burchett, the first reporter to enter Hiroshima without an Army escort wrote: "In Hiroshima, 30 days after the first atomic bomb," [. . .] "people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly—people who were uninjured in the cataclysm from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague" (quoted in Caufield, 63). An article in the September 24 issue of *Life* magazine reported that "the Japanese hinted strongly that parts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had become radioactive. Rescue workers who came into the cities some time later, [the] Japanese reported, were killed by harmful radiations" (quoted in Sharp, 132). Despite these suggestions of the dangers of residual radiation, the American military reports claimed that residual radiation levels in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were too low to have caused such sickness. Stafford Warren, who had been responsible for the health and safety of personnel involved in the Manhattan Project, concluded that the levels of radioactivity in all the areas of Hiroshima that were checked fell "below the hazardous limit; when the readings were extrapolated back to zero hour, the levels were not considered to be of great significance" (Warren 890). Caufield describes the questionable context of Warren's report: "American officials dismissed the allegations [deaths of Hiroshima citizens caused by radioactive disease] as propaganda intended to imply that the US had used an inhumane weapon. Determined to put the rumours and accusations to rest, General [Leslie] Groves ordered a team of Manhattan Project doctors and technicians to the two bombed cities, Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (62). Thus, the United States did not officially recognize the effects of the radiation produced by the atomic bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Contrary to the official American view on radioactive diseases, there has been unremitting litigation over the recognition of and compensation for the syndrome of maladies caused by the residual radiation in Japan. The Japanese government enacted two medical treatment laws for atomic bomb sufferers (The 1957 Law for Health Protection and Medical Care for Atomic bomb Victims and the 1968 Law for Special Measures for Atomic bomb Victims) that intend to preserve and improve the health of the *Hibakusha* (atomic bomb victims) through programs of medical examinations, treatments and disability payments. Limited financial compensation and aid programs have also been enacted under these laws for sufferers of radiation sickness. In reaction to a class action lawsuit undertaken to determine the criteria for recognition as an atomic bomb victim, March 2008 saw an official admission of the illnesses caused by residual

¹ United States. Department of Justice, "Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA)." 13 Nov. 2011. 13 Nov. 2011 <<http://www.justice.gov/civil/common/reca.html>>

² Barton C. Hacker, *Elements of Controversy: The Atomic Energy Commission and Radiation Safety in Nuclear Weapons Testing 1947-1974*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: U of California P, 1994) 266-279.

radiation.

The event that mobilized American scientists, and subsequently the general public, to demand a nuclear test ban was the U.S. explosion of a hydrogen bomb, code-named BRAVO, at the Bikini Atoll in the Pacific Ocean on March 1st, 1954. Radioactive fallout from the test saturated a Japanese fishing boat, *the Lucky Dragon*, causing severe radiation sickness and a death among the crew. In response to the health hazards and environmental contamination caused by the BRAVO test, professional and civilian groups such as the Federation of American Scientists called for a ban on nuclear tests. Internationally prominent scientists and politicians such as Dr. Albert Schweitzer and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India expressed their concern over the impact of environmental pollution from nuclear tests on the human body.³

It was not until 1955 that the U.S. officials confirmed scientist Ralph Lapp's caution that "the new peril from radioactive fall-out is more than just a threat to civil defense—it is a peril to humanity" (Rose 26). At the same time they "admitted that the explosion [the BRAVO test] had produced radioactive fallout over a seven-thousand-square-mile area" (Rose 26). Despite the recognition of the dangers of radioactive fallout, the U.S. government was reluctant to create a fallout shelter system, which would have cost an estimated \$20 billion to \$30 billion in the late 1950's. Kenneth D. Rose describes the attitudes of Dwight Eisenhower and John Foster Dulles towards the creation of any kind of fallout shelter network:

While Eisenhower had been willing to spend the money to build up the nation's nuclear arms, he was not willing to spend the money on a shelter system to protect against nuclear arms. [. . .] Eisenhower and Dulles, having kept overall defense spending in check by emphasizing nuclear armaments, clearly had no enthusiasms for spending the savings on a \$20 billion to \$30 billion shelter program. The rejection by the Eisenhower administration of the shelter programs recommended by the Hollifield committee, the Gaither Report, the Rockefeller Report, and the administration's own civil defense director would make this clear. (Rose 22)

According to Oakes, Vice-President Richard Nixon put it more baldly:

In the NSC [National Security Council] meeting on March 27, 1958, Nixon dissected with brutal consistency the rationale and limits of government support for fallout shelters. [. . .] From the perspective of national survival, did it really matter whether the casualties numbered 30 million or 50 million? According to Nixon, this was a distinction without a difference.

American security rested not on the passive defenses of civil defense, but on the active defense provided by the American nuclear deterrent. Therefore, why waste any money at all on civil defense? Nixon's answer was that the government had to make some gesture in the direction of a shelter program [. . .] It was necessary to maintain the public illusion of security through civil defense. (Oakes 166)

Giving priority to national over human security, the government therefore did not spend any significant amount of money on a fallout shelter program, and concentrated instead on an arms

³ Evangelista, Matthew, *Unarmed Forces: The Transnational Movement to End the Cold War*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002) 47.

race based on the logic of nuclear deterrence. Despite the many warnings about the dangers of fallout issued by scientists and journalists, the U.S. government understated its effect on human health and the environment, and left shelter construction as a matter of self-protection. What little shelter-construction instructions the government gave out to the public were inadequate. All the while, in the years between 1946 and 1962, the government conducted hundreds of nuclear bomb tests in the atmosphere, and exposed several hundred thousand U.S. veterans to radiation while they served in the armed forces. Therefore, it seems reasonable to suppose that William's meager self-made fallout shelter is symbolic of the lax policy of civil defense and its limited budget: a policy which was not sufficient to ensure the safety of U.S. citizens in the 1950's.

In fact, controversy still surrounds the non-recognition of several thousand sufferers of radioactive disease even up to the present day in the United States.⁴ In the late 1970's in particular, upon recognizing that they suffered from diseases possibly caused by radiation from nuclear bomb testing, many people began to turn to the courts for compensation and apology. It was not until 1990, when RECA was enacted, that the United States officially recognized its responsibilities. Thus, there was widespread anxiety over the dangers of radiation in American society during the time when O'Brien was writing *The Nuclear Age*, and this anxiety is well reflected in the novel.

III

The narrative of this novel reflects the fact that during the Cold War, the United States placed its priorities on the arms race and civil defense, that is to say, the preparation for a nuclear war. These priorities signified another suppression of democracy in nuclear politics. It was only a part of the U.S. citizenry who were involved with the arms buildup and civil defense. Civil defense programs were mainly envisioned to protect American nuclear families in suburbs, where the residents were mostly white. Historian Laura McEnaney indicates that in the 1950's, American people of underclass and color did not live in single-family homes.⁵ According to Elaine Tyler May, "they [American leaders] allowed racial segregation to prevail in suburbs, where the Federal Housing Authority and lending banks maintained redlining policies that prevented black Americans from obtaining home mortgages" (10). As Sharp puts it: "[t]he survival of the idealized white suburban family came to represent a major aspect of the strategy of the United States for winning an atomic war, at least in the official propaganda of the period" (187).⁶ In 1990, when RECA was enacted, it was officially recognized that the

⁴ Stephen Salaff cites *The New York Times* article: "Cancer Victims, Seeking U.S. Aid, Say A-bomb Roles Caused Disease," *The New York Times*, June 9, 1979, p.12. "The thousands of American servicemen exposed to Hiroshima and Nagasaki residual radiation are among several hundred thousand U.S. veterans exposed to atomic radiation while in the armed forces. The vast majority were ordered to be part of U.S. atomic bomb testing between 1946 and 1962. . . . petitions signed by 40 veterans and widows—urging that the U.S. government grant their claims for service-connected benefits based on residual radiation exposure in Hiroshima and Nagasaki—have been presented to White House and Veterans Administration officials." *Newsletter*, Committee for U.S. Veterans of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Portland, Ore. (Autumn 1979).

⁵ McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization and Everyday Life in the Fifties*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 21.

U.S. nuclear industry relied on labor which involved radiation exposure in the processes of atomic bomb testing, nuclear power generation, uranium mining and milling, and disposal of nuclear waste. The people who engaged in these hazardous duties were mostly people of underclass and color. These people and their efforts were disregarded and marginalized before the enactment of RECA. In the scene where William takes his wife Bobbi to the remains of a uranium mine after he has become wealthy from uranium prospecting, what can be noted is the invisibility of these citizens and their labor:

We [Bobbi, William and their daughter Melinda] prospered in a prosperous world. We took our showers as a team, the three of us, and there was peace and durability, a kind of art. [. . .] We shared things—our lives, our histories. Once, on a whim, I took Bobbi up to have a look at the uranium strike. The season was pre-winter, twiggy and bare, a desolate wind, and I held her arm and pointed out the scars left by man and machine. I showed her where the mountain had once been. [. . .] It was science, I told her. Morality was not a factor. Bobbi said she understood. Yet, for me, there was something sad about the disappearance of that mountain, because it was now a pasture, [. . .] with pasture weeds and mesquite bent east with the wind. (283-284)

Here, in contrast to the visibility of the idealized white suburban family, what is significant is that the remains of the uranium mine is presented as a vacuity: the relevant labor upon which William's money rests is thoroughly invisible and marginalized. Therefore, the structure in which the voices of radiation-exposed laborers are silenced and marginalized evidences this suppression of democracy in U.S. nuclear politics.

IV

Ulrich Beck argues that public confidence in formal politics erodes in a late modern society; instead, the citizens prefer direct political participation outside the formal boundaries of representative democracy. In a late modern society, where science and technology authorize knowledge production, professionals with scientific knowledge are increasingly involved in the process of policy-making (Beck 1992, 186-187). As policy-making has come to rely on the knowledge of scientists and technocrats, the political process becomes incomprehensible to the general public, which is not familiar with scientific knowledge. This situation deepens the gap between institutional politics and the common citizenry. However, Beck also indicates that the alienation of the public from formal politics should not be regarded as a decline in political activity among citizens. He indicates the result of this alienation is the emergence of a wide range of *subpolitics*, or direct politics: the “selective intervention, sometimes even individual participation in political decisions, bypassing the institutions of representative will-formation (political parties, parliaments), often without legal backing or in deliberate violation or in deliberate violation of all laws. In other words, subpolitics mean the shaping and transformation of society from below” (Beck 2009, 90). *The Nuclear Age* presents the turmoil in this phase of political change, the growth of subpolitics and the citizens' alienation from formal politics.

⁶ Sharp introduces a typical example of FCDA's focus on idealized white suburban families in *Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture*. (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2007) 190.

In the mid-1960's, when the United States was sunk in a morass of war, college student William pickets the college's cafeteria with a sign that reads "THE BOMBS ARE REAL" (74). Although few of the regular students pay attention to his protest, after two months, William falls in with a group of antiwar activist students called "the Committee" (80). Sarah Strouch, who had gone to high school with William and who was a popular cheerleader, surprisingly joins the group and quickly becomes the leader. It is Sarah who convinces the group to use violence and lawless acts in their activities against the escalation of bloodshed in the Vietnam War. The radical nature of the Committee comes to a climax after the group goes underground in 1968 and undertakes paramilitary training in Cuba with two men, Nethro and Ebenezer Keezer. These two men will stop at nothing in their actions to bring an end to the war. Every member of the Committee except William takes part in a series of subversive operations: an ironic fact as their cause is to stop the war and achieve peace. William narrates, "Here, I thought, was everything I'd run from. But you couldn't run far enough or fast enough. You couldn't dodge the global dragnet. The killing zone kept expanding. Reaction or revolution, no matter, it was a hazard to health either way" (206). In *The Nuclear Age*, O'Brien symbolically attacks the New Left movement: a movement that denounces the diplomatic stance which justifies an arms race on the ground of a supposed absence of any hierarchy of legitimate authority in the international system. *The Nuclear Age* demonstrates how the New Left activists themselves fall into the security dilemma: the more one arms to protect oneself from others, the more threatened these others become, and the more prone they are to arm themselves in turn in order to protect their own security interests. Paradoxically, the violence of the Committee escalates, attendant with the continued carnage in Vietnam: they hijack a consignment cargo of M-16s, and furthermore, a nuclear warhead. Eventually, Sarah gains prominence as a wanted terrorist and appears on the cover of *Newsweek*. William becomes increasingly alienated from the group, dreaming of non-violence and peace during the paramilitary training:

That night, as in many nights, I indulged in fantasy. It was a means of escape, a way of gliding from here-and-now to there-and-then, an instrument by which I could measure the disjunction between what was and what might be. I imagined myself in repose beneath a plywood Ping-Pong table. I imagined my father's arms around me. I imagined, also, a world in which men would not do to men the things men so often do to men. It was a world without armies, without cannibalism or treachery or greed, a world safe and undivided. Fantasy, nothing else. (179)

In October 1969, William and Ned Rafferty, a latecomer to the Committee, drive to the sea and dump the crate of M-16 rifles that the group had hijacked. William and Rafferty do this in opposition to the other members of the group, who are still in favor of using force. Their intent in performing this act is to prevent the group's use of weapons in an upcoming coast-to-coast antiwar demonstration. After challenging the militarization and arming of the group, William leaves both them, and activist politics. William's departure here is symbolic of the decline of nuclear awareness and activism in the United States from 1963 to the later 1970's. According to Paul Boyer, the division of the leftists led to the waning of the anti-nuclear movement:

The differences between the New Left and older organizations like SANE [the National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy], he [Donald Keys, executive director of SANE] said, were fundamental. SANE believed in democracy and in the "common sense and

goodwill” of the American people, and placed “communication and dialogue with the public and the power structure at the center of its approach.” SANE believed in working through the systems for its broad ranging but nevertheless limited goals. New Left radicals, by contrast, “reject the democratic process, encourage violence, and offer only protest and opposition.” Young people, “becoming conscious of social issues for the first time,” Keys went on, had reacted “in a total way against hypocrisy, gross materialism, and dehumanization of their society” and seemed unable or unwilling to “compartmentalize or fragment their response.” Between two such divergent approaches, concluded Keys, there was no common ground. (23)

This quotation presents the problem of democracy in the nuclear age. While the general public was increasingly alienated from formal politics, it was difficult to ensure that the democratic process remained free from radicalization in subpolitics. Furthermore, the rejection of the democratic process by the New Left was concurrent with their emotionalization. O’Brien suggests that the youthful zeal and commitment of the New Left were rooted in emotions, and as a result the New Left’s subpolitics were increasingly dissociated from open, rational, and democratic discussions and negotiations. This is expressed in the following description of Sarah:

Cheerleader to rabble-rouser: It was a smooth, almost effortless transition. Surprising, maybe, and yet the impulse was there from the start. In a sense, I realized, cheerleaders are terrorists. All that zeal and commitment. A craving for control. A love of pageantry and crowds and slogans and swollen rhetoric. Power, too. The hot, energizing rush of absolute authority: *Lean to the left, lean to the right*. And then finally that shrill imperative: *Fight—fight—fight!* Don’t politicians issue the same fierce exhortations? Isn’t sex an active ingredient in the political enterprise? Pressing flesh, wooing the voters, stroking the Body Politic—aren’t these among the secret lures of any cheerleaders? (100)

By comparing terrorists to cheerleaders, O’Brien depicts this emotionalization of subpolitics, and the discrepancy between deliberative democracy and subpolitics. Moreover, he suggests that not only subpolitics, but also formal politics, the politics of the state, have undergone change. The narrator significantly compares politicians to cheerleaders in an analogy of how the state has governmentalized in the late modern era. Wendy Brown, drawing on Michel Foucault’s idea of governmentality, explains how the state organizes and manages populations:

The “governmentalization” of the state connects “the constitutional, fiscal, organizational, and judicial powers of the state. . . with endeavors to manage the economic life, the health and habits of the population, the civility of the masses, and so forth.” [. . .] While governmentality in general includes the organization and deployment of space, time, intelligibility, thought, bodies, and technologies to produce governable subjects, the governmentalization of the state both incorporates these tactical concerns into state operations and articulates with them in other, nonstate domains. (81-82)

Brown criticizes Foucault for underestimating the centrality of the state in governmental processes. She contends that the state plays a significant role in governmentality in that it is the state that legitimizes the institutions, knowledge and discourses that produce and reproduce governable subjects. She argues that, “A full account of governmentality, [. . .] would attend

not only to the production, organization, and mobilization of subjects by a variety of powers but also to the problem of legitimizing these operations by the singularly accountable object in the field of political power: the state" (83). Late modern politics has developed into a political imperative that is, "largely nonlegal without being extralegal, as a state speech act that is only occasionally an enforceable rule, and as a popular discourse that circulates in and among schools, churches, civic associations, museums, and street conversation" (79). "[G]overnmentality both employs *and* infiltrates a number of discourses ordinarily conceived as unrelated to political power, governance, or the state. These include scientific discourses [. . .], religious discourses, and popular discourses" (81). Therefore, as the state governmentalizes, the processes of political regulation and legitimization become increasingly opaque, subtle, and complex. Moreover, as governmentality operates on people's bodies and psyches, appetites and ethics, work and citizenship, national politics become a set of physicalized and emotionalized processes working on an unconscious level, far removed from political processes as rational deliberation. Many under modern governmentality are unconscious of its operation and application, and believe in their complete autonomy. Having observed O'Brien's awareness of physicalization and emotionalization of both formal politics and subpolitics, and of their dissociation from rational deliberation, what are to be considered next are specific examples of governmentality in the novel: demonstrations of how subtle and unnoticed governmentality is while operating on William's body and psyche.

What is crucial in the novel is William's unconscious internalization of norms. There are several moments when William is driven to act by inner compulsions that he cannot understand in a rational way. He does not know why he cannot choose Sarah, the beautiful activist leader who constantly confesses her love for him, over Bobbi, the flight attendant whom he fell in love with during the flight he took in order to escape the draft and start his underground activities:

When I told him [psychiatrist Chuck Adamson] about Sarah, he asked the essential question: Why didn't I go with her? There was no answer for it. Trust, I said. Or no trust. Did I love her? I did. Did she love me? She no doubt did. Then why? I shrugged: there was no answer for it. It wasn't our universe. I didn't know. Not our universe, that was all I could say, except no trust, or not enough, or the inability to see how it could end happily. But I didn't know. (252)

In addition, although he deeply cares for his wife and daughter, on discovering that his wife had an affair, he temporarily loses his sanity and attempts to kill both himself and his family. He plants dynamite in the hole he is digging as a nuclear shelter and plans to detonate it underneath them. Aware of the danger, Bobbi and Melinda keep William away by locking themselves in a room in the house. The desire to commit this murder-suicide remains inexplicable even to himself: "A lockout, but why? I'm a pacifist, for God's sake. The whole Vietnam mess: I kept my nose clean, all those years on the run, a man of the most impeccable nonviolence. So why? There are no conclusions" (62). An explanation for his actions is hinted at, in the following poem by Bobbi:

*Relations are strained
in the nuclear family.
It is upon us, the hour*

*of evacuation,
the splitting of blood
infinitives.
The clock says fission
fusion
critical mass. (122)*

Bobbi's poem directly compares the disintegration of the nuclear family to the atomic fission that leads to a nuclear explosion. Both Bobbi and William associate the creation of a nuclear family with liberation from the fear of a nuclear war, as throughout 1950's and 1960's, marriage and the nuclear family represented a refuge from this threat. National civil defense strategies regarded the family as the most basic and principal unit for coping with a nuclear attack, and so the government promoted the image of the ideal home, and the image of the family as a form of safety.⁷ According to May, "[a] 1950 civil defense plan put men in charge of such duties as firefighting, rescue work, street clearing, and rebuilding, while women were to attend child care, hospital work, and emergency feeding" (101). Furthermore, according to May, not only the nuclear family but also private shelters symbolized protection in a nuclear war: "Whether constructed of concrete or created out of well-stocked basements, family shelters contributed to homeowners' pride and became 'an important source of reassurance. . . with considerable symbolic value as a anxiety-reducing feature of the environment,' argued a Yale psychologist in a RAND Corporation study" (103).⁸ Thus William's digging of a shelter on the verge of a family breakup, and his accompanying attempt at family suicide, imply how deeply he internalizes normative discourses of the nuclear age, which he does not grow out of. These neurotic and disturbed actions appear to come from an excessive defensive reaction when he perceives his family's breakup as his loss of protection in a nuclear war.

Mark A. Heberle is correct when he says "Bobbi appears and comforts him [William], [in a turbulence,] she seems to promise refuge from a lifetime of nuclear age traumatization. [. . .] By the time they have landed, William is not only feeling well again but has already asked her where they will elope and how many children they should have" (160). Imbued with the Cold War gender norm, William chooses an ideal wife who will protect him from danger. Her physical beauty can be compared to the exemplary wives in the government's civil defense publications: "[s]he's a gorgeous woman, blond and long-legged, those shapely fingers and turquoise eyes, a way of gliding from spot to spot as if under the spell of a fairy tale, [. . .]" (58). In contrast to the politically committed Sarah, Bobbi is temperamental and frequently changes from one partner to another. Although it seems strange that William knowingly proposes to her, her fickle nature is, in fact, the reason why he is so attracted to her. Her inconstancy is the source of this attraction, in that it allows him to display his masculine

⁷ FCDA publicized the concept of professionalized homemaking for the atomic age: "[A] highly publicized FCDA campaign, Duck and Cover, also encouraged widespread female participation. [. . .] Although the FCDA distributed *Duck and Cover* instructional booklets to schools across the nation, government officials expected parents, most especially mothers, to reinforce the lessons of civil defense exercises in the home." Quote is in The Cold War Museum, "The Federal Civil Defense Agency (FCDA) Women Defend the Nation." (1950) 13 Nov. 2011. 13 Nov. 2011 <http://www.coldwar.org/articles/50s/women_civildefense.asp>

⁸ Quote from RAND psychologist is in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985) 331.

decisiveness and strength in contrast:

“You’ve led a nasty life,” I [William] said, and I ticked off the betrayals—me and the navigator and TWA and Scholheimer and NYU [. . .] It was a hard speech. Here and there I shouted. “You [Bobbi] can’t stick. You don’t know what commitment is. You can’t want a thing and get it and still want it. You quit. You’re unfaithful [. . .] You’re shallow and cowardly and vain and disgusting [. . .] and I love you with all my heart, and I swear to God—I swear it—I’ll never let you go. (282-283)

William’s mustering of masculine resolve and strength in the quotation above is comparable to the gendered symbolism in the policy of containment, as Rebecca Grant indicates:

To mount the defense against potential Soviet aggression, the United States had to present its most masculine image to legitimize the military component necessary for national security. The *policy* of containment articulated in the late 1940s and early 1950s relied on masculine symbolism. George Kennan, frequently cited as the conceptual architect of containment, wrote: “Should the Western world [. . .] muster up the political manliness to deny Russia either moral or material support for the consolidation of Russian power throughout Eastern and Central Europe, Russia probably not be able to maintain its hold successfully for any length of time over all of the territory over which it has today staked out a claim.” [. . .]

To muster the political resolve that Kennan described as “manliness,” the West, and the United States particularly, emphasized traditional concepts of femininity to generate more of the public “political manliness” through contrast. (Grant 125)

Governmentality in the Cold War relied on gendered symbolism. Bobbi’s fickleness, one of the traditional stereotypes of femininity, enables William to prove his manliness in contrast. Thus, in this context, Bobbi is the right person to be William’s wife. She provides a refuge from both nuclear fear, and political involvement, for William. On the other hand, Sarah is completely different from the traditional female image. As the leader of an activist group, she is intensely committed to politics. She is more decisive, more strong-willed, and more actively involved with the antiwar movement than either Bobbi or William. She is not a woman who will stay in a private arena, the home, but a woman who participates in public life. Therefore she cannot contrastively highlight William’s masculinity, but instead threatens his secure sense of manliness. May sheds light on these images of women outside the home, in the Cold War:

It was important to recognize their increasing sexual and economic emancipation, but to channel those energies into the family. Outside the home (or even inside the home without a strong male authority), they would become a dangerous, destructive force. This message was overtly expressed in the literature surrounding the cold war, civil defense, and the family. So pervasive and lasting was the connection between taming fears of the atomic age and taming women that as late as 1972, a civil defense pamphlet personified dangerous radioactive rays as sexy woman. (105)

Thus, according to the Cold War gender norm in the United States, Sarah is not at all a wifely woman. Moreover, while Bobbi is associated with the American way of life, promoted as a source of safety for American citizens in the Cold War years, Sarah frequently expresses her desire to go on a journey to Rio de Janeiro when the war is over. In this light, what is implied

is Sarah's un-Americanness: a characteristic that prevents William from choosing her as his wife in spite of their affection for each other. All these examples make it clear that the novel presents how governmentality operates on characters' minds and psyches in a way that they themselves are not aware of.

V

The 44th U.S. president, Barak Obama, made a historic speech committing himself to a world without nuclear weapons, in Prague, Czech Republic, on April 5th 2009: "First, the United States will take concrete steps towards a world without nuclear weapons. To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy, and urge others to do the same".⁹ Furthermore, New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty), a nuclear arms reduction treaty between the United States and the Russian Federation, entered into force on February 5th 2011. Hence, the United States has officially moved into a post nuclear-arms-race era. What underlies the recent U.S. plan for nuclear armament reduction is the idea that any peace predicated by nuclear deterrence theory is essentially precarious, because such a peace cannot evade the security dilemma. The most rational approach to avoid a nuclear war, for the countries that have nuclear weapons, is not the continuation of an arms race but rather the promotion of nuclear disarmament.

This essay has attempted to trace how in his novel, O'Brien depicts the multiple changes in democracy and the psychological impact of these changes on people living under the U.S. nuclear deterrence theory. First, by analyzing the history of civil defense policy, U.S. official publicity about radioactivity, and scientists' concerns about residual radiation, it has been made clear that the novel portrays the widespread nuclear anxiety. It arises from the lax policy of civil defense, its budgetary restrictions, the prioritization of the arms race, and a polarization in the estimation of the nuclear danger by scientists, journalists, and the U.S. government; which were unable to ensure the safety of the U.S. citizens in the 1950's.

Secondly, on the basis of the historical fact that civil defense programs were mainly envisioned to protect American white families in the suburbs, who were relatively financially secure, what has been clarified is the marginalization of radiation-exposed laborers in U.S. nuclear politics. The novel's thematic focus on the danger of a nuclear war, foregrounds the invisibility of the many laborers exposed to radiation: the very laborers who sustained the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Thirdly, this essay has analyzed how the novel represented the American citizens' alienation from formal politics, and the resulting democratic deliberation, in the nuclear age. When the general public becomes increasingly alienated from formal politics, it is difficult to ensure that the democratic process remains free from radicalization and emotionalization in its subpolitics. The difficulty is expressed in the internal discord between the radicalized and non-radical members of the Committee. In addition, O'Brien depicts the governmentalization of the state: how national politics have become a strand of physicalized and emotionalized processes

⁹ Quote is in The White House, "Remarks by President Barak Obama. Hradcany square, Prague, Czech Republic." 21 Nov. 2011. 21 Nov. 2011 < http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-By-President-Barack-Obama-In-Prague-As-Delivered/>

on an unconscious level, a level far removed from traditional democratic processes such as rational deliberation. By charting the process in which the characters are affected by Cold War norms of gender and family, O'Brien has indicated a sense of helplessness and passivity among American citizens, who are subconsciously controlled by U.S. nuclear policies. These observations lead to the conclusion that O'Brien successfully predicted the present U.S. promotion of nuclear armament reduction, in that he expressed strong concerns about the precariousness of the peace and democracy built on nuclear deterrence theory, the arms race, and civil defense programs in the Cold War years.

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