**Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950**Although the United States government sponsored a civil defense program during World War I, modern American civil defense did not begin until May 1941, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Office of Civilian Defense (OCD). Military technological developments since World War I, especially in airplanes and submarines, had made attacks on American soil real possibilities and challenged the government to defend the United States and protect civilians without overly militarizing American society.

The OCD created defense-related programs like air-raid procedures and black-out drills to minimize damage from aerial bombardment, and it relied on community volunteers to carry them out. The OCD also sponsored programs like daycare and family health services to strengthen communities' social ties. Although the OCD closed in June 1945, policymakers facing the beginning of the Cold War reestablished a small civil defense program in March 1949 under the National Security Resources Board (NSRB), an agency created by the National Security Act of 1947. Within two years, however, international events would spur Congress to significantly expand this program and tailor America's civil defense programs to the age of nuclear warfare under the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950 (64 Stat. 1245).

**THE THREAT OF NUCLEAR WAR**

When the NSRB was established, only the United States possessed nuclear weapons. The Soviet Union's successful nuclear bomb test in August 1949 surprised American defense planners and forced them to reconsider America's military and civilian preparedness and capabilities. Then, in October of that year, Mao Zedong, the head of the Chinese Communist Party who became leader of the nation, declared China a Communist state. By November 1950 China was supporting North Korean attacks against South Korea and a United Nations force led by, and consisting mostly of, members of the United States armed forces. These events forced government leaders to reconsider whether they could prevent nuclear war with the Soviet Union or an allied Communist government—or at least whether government planning could help the United States survive one.

The task of averting nuclear war fell largely within the realms of military and foreign policy. Surviving a war became the central mission of civil defense planners. Congress and policymakers recognized the impossibility of providing absolute protection from nuclear weapons. Although they considered comprehensive, community-level bunker systems, these were rejected as too costly or too difficult for most of America's 150 million people to reach during an attack. Instead, they decided on a program that encouraged Americans to learn how to protect themselves until the government could respond. Returning to the volunteerism that characterized civil defense during the world wars, this concept of "self-help" appealed to Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals alike. Many wanted to reduce federal spending in the aftermath of the New Deal or were skeptical of greater military responsibility for civilian, peacetime programs. Others simply found it unnecessary or unwise to implement elaborate shelter systems, evacuation plans, or health care and social programs based on the mere possibility of a nuclear attack. Educating Americans to protect themselves from nuclear weapons became the centerpiece of civil defense policy.

**GOALS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ACT**

On December 1, 1950, President Harry S. Truman issued an executive order creating a new agency, the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA), and transferring civil defense responsibilities to it from the NSRB. With the Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950, Congress charged the FCDA with creating shelter, evacuation, and training programs that state and local governments would implement. Local governments could request federal funds for these programs and for post-attack health care and reconstruction. However, the Federal Civil Defense Act did not fund any of these programs, and subsequent legislation throughout the administrations of Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower provided only minimal resources to carry out these goals. Both Congress and the executive branch preferred instead to invest in military and diplomatic programs that might prevent nuclear war and eliminate the need for expensive, long-term reconstruction programs.

With its limited funding the FCDA produced films, pamphlets, and other materials teaching Americans how to build family shelters and stock them with food and supplies. In conjunction with leading universities, the FCDA also studied the psychological effects of the threat and occurrence of nuclear war to better prepare their education and assistance plans. And through extensive public relations programs with print and television media outlets, the FCDA reinforced the idea that, aside from effective defense and foreign policy, individual preparedness was the next best response to nuclear threats.

**CIVIL DEFENSE AFTER 1958**

The FCDA lasted only until 1958, but federally supervised and funded civil defense programs continued throughout, and even beyond, the Cold War. The Federal Civil Defense Act adapted the World War II model that had combined defense and social programs, but it scaled back the latter considerably. To allay concerns about militarizing a democratic society, the act made the FCDA a civilian-led agency. But civil defense remained a secondary issue behind broader defense and diplomatic programs. Theories of containment—preventing the spread of Communism—and military strategies shaped policy-makers' budgetary priorities. Nevertheless, programs under the Federal Civil Defense Act spurred large numbers of Americans to become more deeply engaged in the political processes shaping foreign policy, defense spending, and nuclear policies. Even today, the legacy of the Civil Defense Act is apparent in the civilian-led Department of Homeland Security, whose programs are organized around a different national security threat—international terrorism.