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**Kenton Clymer. "The Ground Observer Corps: Public Relations and the Cold War in the 1950s."**

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As a topic of interest, civil defense remains on the periphery of Cold War studies. References to civil defense in histories of the Cold War are typically brief and reductive. The number of full-length works devoted to civil defense remains modest, while interest in topics such as the Vietnam War shows no sign of waning.<sup>1</sup> The internationalizing trend in Cold War studies, set by multi-lingual scholars conducting global research, has bypassed civil defense; there are no comprehensive studies comparing the civil defense programs of the nations most affected by the Cold War.<sup>2</sup>

The neglect is not hard to explain. Civil defense itself was always an underfunded, neglected program, important to only a handful of national security officials at any one time. Sophisticated publicity campaigns failed to motivate the public to volunteer for civil defense programs. By measure of its historical significance within the Cold War, civil defense is dwarfed by containment, détente, and other topics. Another reason for the lack

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<sup>1</sup> Important studies of Cold War civil defense include Tracy C. Davis, *Stages of Emergency: Cold War Nuclear Civil Defense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Dee Garrison, *Bracing for Armageddon: Why Civil Defense Never Worked* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Andrew D. Grossmann, *Neither Dead nor Red: Civil Defense and American Political Development during the Early Cold War* (New York: Routledge, 2001); David F. Krugler, *This Is Only a Test: How Washington, D.C., Prepared for Nuclear War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Guy Oakes, *The Imaginary War: Civil Defense and American Cold War Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> There are, however, case studies of civil defense programs in other western nations. See Andrew Burtch, *Give Me Shelter: The Failure of Canada's Cold War Civil Defence* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012); Matthew Grant, *After the Bomb: Civil Defence and Nuclear War in Britain, 1945-68* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

of interest in civil defense is its ephemeral presence, literally and figuratively. Much of the historical record of civil defense consists of posters, fliers, pamphlets—by an archive's own standard, ephemera. Metaphorically, civil defense is ephemeral because it rarely advanced beyond planning stages. On paper and in the hopes of its few dedicated proponents, civil defense was impressive; in practice, it was a shadow of this imagined entity. Finally, the study of civil defense requires counterfactual conjecture, a habit historians are trained to suppress. Would civil defense have worked at all? Did civil defense planners accurately predict the effects of nuclear war? Would survivors have behaved in the ways anticipated by these planners? Because civil defense was never put to the test, so to speak, these questions remain unanswerable. Why attend to a history that never happened when there are myriad actual Cold War events to study?

Cold War civil defense is, however, a topic worthy of sustained inquiry, as Kenton Clymer ably demonstrates in his study of the Ground Observer Corps (GOC) during the 1950s. One of the few Cold War civil defense programs to make the leap from paper to practice, the GOC was a volunteer-based, national network of aircraft observer posts organized and partially administered by the U.S. Air Force (USAF) from 1949 to 1959. The GOC's primary purpose was to provide a backstop for radar, which during these years was not fully capable of detecting aircraft flying at low altitudes. Volunteers watched the skies (many posts were expected to operate round-the-clock) and reported sightings to so-called filter centers, also staffed by volunteers. The filter centers calculated the aircrafts' trajectories, then reported this data by telephone to the USAF. Although military personnel helped oversee the filter centers, volunteers did the brunt of work. Clymer convincingly argues that the GOC had another purpose: to serve "the public relations interests of the Air Force, U.S. air defense, and, more generally, the Cold War policies of the United States" (p. 34). Clymer also contends that the failure of the USAF to meet its volunteer quotas and to put the GOC on full operational status "provides some credence to the contrarian view about the overwhelming fear of an imminent Soviet nuclear strike on the United States that is commonly said to have characterized U.S. society in the 1950s" (p. 34). In other words, public apathy toward the GOC reveals that the general population was not as afraid of or as worried about a Soviet attack as many scholars have argued.<sup>3</sup>

It is recommended that readers also note a related article published by Clymer in *The Journal of Military History* in 2011.<sup>4</sup> In this piece, Clymer traces the origins of the GOC and offers the same two-part thesis as the article under review here: the GOC served a valuable public relations purpose even as indifference toward the GOC showed widespread lack of

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<sup>3</sup> As examples of this orthodox view, Clymer cites Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) and Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See note 3 of his article for the full citation.

<sup>4</sup> Kenton Clymer, "U.S. Homeland Defense in the 1950s: The Origins of the Ground Observer Corps," *Journal of Military History* 75, no. 3 (July 2011): 835-859.

concern about the possibility of nuclear war. He emphasizes the military's response to the Soviet test of an atomic weapon in August 1949 as the main reason the USAF wanted to build up the GOC, even though an early test of ground observers revealed many problems: understaffed posts, incomplete coverage, difficulty spotting aircraft flying simulated attack routes. The USAF believed these problems would be overcome with concerted recruitment and proper training. An effort was made to distance GOC from other civil defense programs because such association was seen as a "kiss of death."<sup>5</sup> Yet from the start, the USAF expected state civil defense programs to recruit GOC volunteers and to fund the operating costs of the posts. Responsibility for the GOC was further divided by the participation of the White House and the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) in recruitment drives. Despite this overlapping responsibility, the USAF expected its partners to defer unquestioningly to its authority and judgment. For example, at a January 1950 conference with state civil defense officials, Lt. Colonel Barnett Beers brusquely dismissed the concerns of a California participant who questioned the wisdom of putting filter centers in cities, the prime targets, and of using telephone networks to relay observations. "The chances of an A-bomb or any bomb knocking the communication system out or any great portion of it is very very remote," Beers answered.<sup>6</sup>

As Clymer shows in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* article, the mindset revealed by Beers's answer hurt the GOC in two ways: one, the USAF's imperious treatment of state civil defense officials bred resentment and inhibited cooperation; and two, fantastic predictions about the effects of nuclear war undermined efforts to convince members of the public that the threat of war required their participation in the GOC. From a civil defense standpoint, the timing of the Korean War was perfect because it seemingly showed the threat to the United States just as the GOC was being built up. Clymer notes that there was a modest increase in the number of GOC volunteers after the war's outbreak, but that interest did not last long. In July 1951, the GOC's goal was 500,000 volunteers; it had just 200,000 by early 1952. By the year's end, the number had fallen to 150,000 active volunteers, even though Operation *Skywatch*, carried out in July 1952, attempted to integrate the GOC into the air defense system by putting the GOC on twenty-four-hour activation. Air Force publicity repeatedly warned that the end of the Korean War in July 1953 did not ease the threat to the United States because the Soviets were stockpiling bombs, building better bombers, and developing an ability to jam radar. The USAF was, however, a victim of its own success: its touting of the capability of U.S. fighter-interceptors led many to conclude that ground observers were unnecessary. Trying to strike a balance between scaring and calming the American people, the USAF ended up frustrating the people they needed the most. As one observer who quit the GOC put it, "the war ended and there was no necessity for the lookout" (p. 40). Another dropout was blunter: "doubletalk by Administration

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<sup>5</sup> Clymer, "U.S. Homeland," 844.

<sup>6</sup> Clymer, "U.S. Homeland," 845.

leaders” led the citizenry to doubt that the Soviets would strike (p. 40). Clymer’s treatment of this tension is one of the article’s greatest strengths.

For the rest of the decade, the GOC struggled to meet ever-rising expectations set by the USAF. In January 1954, a conference of USAF officers and state civil defense directors judged GOC’s effectiveness to be so low that they recommended putting it on standby status. Instead, the USAF stepped up its involvement and support. For example, it opened up its GOC school, previously limited to military personnel, to civilian volunteers. Exercise *Sky Scan* (held in May, June, and October 1954) showed some improvement in the abilities of observers to detect aircraft. These results prompted the USAF to expand the GOC from 36 states to 48 states, put more posts on twenty-four-hour activation, and try to recruit as many as 1.5 million volunteers. By September 1955, there were 9,230 active posts, up from 5,452, and the number of round-the-clock posts went from 1,427 to 1,598. USAF officers and servicemen began visiting posts to bolster the observers’ sense of their importance within the air defense system. Yet by the end of the year, the number of active posts had started to fall, and the goal of enlisting more than a million volunteers was, as Clymer puts it, “always a pipe dream” (p. 45). Meanwhile, improvements to radar and the Eisenhower administration’s own strategic planning spelled an end to the GOC. Reductions of GOC activity began in 1956; in August 1957, the USAF told the Advertising Council that it could stop working on GOC publicity. The GOC limped along until an official announcement in November 1958 deactivated all posts, effective January 1959.

This soundly-researched article—in addition to relevant collections at the Truman and Eisenhower presidential libraries, Clymer consulted Air Force records at Maxwell Air Force Base—raises two issues of interest to Cold War historians. The first, as noted above, relates to the USAF’s own motives in supporting the GOC in spite of considerable evidence that volunteer quotas and post readiness were not being achieved. Clymer solidly supports his argument that the USAF viewed the GOC primarily as a public-relations tool. He provides numerous examples of this treatment; one in particular stands out. As Major General Norris Harbold remarked in 1956, GOC volunteers “are really selling the Air Force to civilian communities and to a great number of American families. The good public relations and the recruiting value to the Air Force is immense” (p. 50). Clymer might have further supported this point by comparing the GOC to the USAF’s publicity for other programs, especially the Nike nuclear anti-aircraft missile bases that were being constructed in some of the same cities in which had GOC posts.<sup>7</sup>

The second issue relates to the volunteers themselves. As much as can be done in an article, Clymer explains why the vast majority of Americans had no interest in civil defense programs like the GOC: people were preoccupied with life, work, and family; the crises that

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<sup>7</sup> See Christopher J. Bright, *Continental Defense in the Eisenhower Era: Nuclear Anti-aircraft Arms and the Cold War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), which provides a thorough account of the military’s public relations campaign for the Nike program.

stimulated interest faded; volunteering often required hardship. (Standing in the cold at night, for example.) But Clymer also offers a fascinating glimpse of the people who *did* volunteer, finding that GOC spotters and filter center volunteers were “widely representative of the general populace” in terms of sex, age, and race and that 98 percent of the volunteers at one filter center were middle class women (p. 36). As he notes, an in-depth analysis of GOC volunteers has not yet been undertaken. Such a study is sorely needed. Knowledge about those who answered the call to volunteer will greatly enhance our understanding of how and why certain Cold War policies resonated with and affected the behavior of the citizenry. Even if the GOC was representative of the population, were some Americans more likely to volunteer than others? Veterans, say, or men and women who belonged to other clubs and organizations? Further study of the GOC can add to our overall knowledge of the impact of U.S. government policies on the population. Clymer’s article, along with his 2011 essay published in *The Journal of Military History*, make a laudable start toward using a previously forgotten civil defense program to explore the Cold War.

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