**Is 'Duck and Cover' still the best we can do?**

**Bob Greene (CNN)** – March 20, 2011

How worried are you feeling about radiation?

For self-evident reasons, your answer may be a little different from what it was when this month began. The terrifying events in Japan have sharply focused thinking about the subject in the United States. First came the earthquake, then the tsunami, and then, against all expectations, the dreadful events at the nuclear energy plants. During the first weekend of the crisis in Japan, CNN.com, on its main page, asked readers the question:

"Do you have confidence in U.S. disaster preparedness?"

More than 375,000 voted. Eighty percent answered no -- they said they did not have confidence.

What exacerbates public tension is the confusing trajectory of the story. One moment there will be dire predictions from experts on nuclear issues, the next moment there will be contradictory pronouncements. Somber warnings from government officials will be followed by optimistic assurances. Someone's going to end up being wrong.

Ever since the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II, there has been a nervous ambivalence in the U.S. about the dangers of radiation when weighed against its benefits.

Older Americans may remember the fluoroscope machines in shoe stores during the 1940s and 1950s; customers, often children, would try on a pair of shoes, insert their feet into a slot in the bottom of the machine and peer down a tube to see the bones of their feet glowing an eerie shade of green. The X-ray machines were considered fun, even a treat. They disappeared when state governments, and insurance companies, began to worry about the wisdom of allowing such contraptions to be used so casually.

The power of radiation became a constant part of the national conversation when, in the late 1940s, the Soviet Union developed the capability to build its own atomic bombs. The United States was well aware of the devastating destructive potential of the bombs; the U.S. government, after all, designed and built the first ones. So what was the nation to do about the new reality that the bomb, with its deadly radiation, might be dropped here?

One answer was a film that is astonishing to watch even now. Produced in 1951, under the auspices of the Federal Civil Defense Administration, it was intended to be viewed in every school in the country. It was shown in classrooms, at special lunchtime programs in school auditoriums -- it was deemed essential to U.S. preparedness.

It was called "Duck and Cover," and it is poignant in how much it unintentionally says about the impotence against nuclear radiation we were conceding.

The film starts with a cartoon turtle wearing a Civil Defense helmet. A cheery musical jingle sounds: "There was a turtle by the name of Bert, and Bert the turtle was very alert." Bert, when he sensed danger, was shown withdrawing his head into his shell.

The friendly voice of a male announcer -- he sounds a little like the dad on the television series "Leave It To Beaver" -- tells the children: "Be sure and remember what Bert the turtle just did, friends, because every one of us must remember to do the same thing."

The cartoon portion of the film ends; it is replaced by black-and-white footage of real schoolchildren learning to duck and cover. They are shown leaping under their desks, covering the backs of their necks with their hands. This is supposed to be their defense against nuclear attack.

"We all know the atomic bomb is very dangerous," the soothing voice says. Over outdoor footage of a small town, the voice says, "You'll know it when it comes. ... A bright flash, brighter than the sun, brighter than anything you've ever seen!" The viewers are instructed to cover their flesh with a sheet of newspaper: "You know how bad sunburn can feel. The atomic bomb flash can burn you worse than a terrible sunburn."

The entire subtext of the instructional film is that lethal radiation may appear at any moment, in a surprising flash, and that other than ducking and covering, there's not much that can be done about it. A boy and girl identified as Paul and Patty are shown walking blithely through their town on a spring day; the narrator says: "No matter where they go or what they do, they always try to remember what to do if the atom bomb explodes right then. It's a bomb! Duck and cover!" The film shows them diving low beside a brick wall.

"Here's Tony, going to his Cub Scout meeting," the voice says. "Tony knows the bomb can explode any time of the year, day or night. He is ready for it." On the screen, there is a sudden flash. The boy jumps from his bike, flings it to the street, and curls up next to a low wall. Within seconds, a uniformed Civil Defense warden arrives to give him instructions.

Whatever amusement value the old government film may provide now is outweighed by the new suspicion that we may still not know quite what to do against the power of radiation unleashed. Almost lost in the news from Japan on the Friday the earthquake hit was this from Washington:

The Transportation Security Administration ordered that all of those radiation-emitting full-body scanners that have recently been introduced in U.S. airports be retested. An internal review, CNN's Mike M. Ahlers reported, showed "calculation errors, missing data and other discrepancies on paperwork by contractors who routinely check the machines' radiation levels."

Sen. Susan Collins, Republican of Maine, rejected [the TSA's contention](http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/03/11/tsa.body.scanners/index.html) that these were merely record-keeping errors. Collins said that there were "gross errors about radiation emissions. ... This is completely unacceptable when it comes to monitoring radiation. If TSA contractors reporting on the radiation levels have done such a poor job, how can airline passengers and crew have confidence in the data used by the TSA to reassure the public?"

All these years later, all these words.

Yet there is a nagging sense that, in the end, what we may be left with is: Duck and cover.

1. Why should Americans have new fears about radiation?
2. What example from the 40’s and 50’s does the article give that points outs Americans of the time’s ignorance of the dangers of radiation?
3. Explain the Duck and Cover video, as described in the article.
4. Why was the video originally created?

After watching the video

1. What is your reaction to the video? Do you think it met its’ original goal?
2. What would be a better solution for today’s issues with radiation/nuclear attack?