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Lesson Plan

Overview

This Activator involves your students in the Communist hysteria of the early 1950s, a time when the cold-war rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union seemed on the brink of heating up to a nuclear attack by one side or the other. As a precaution to the possibility of sudden air attack by the Russians, many Americans—exact numbers will never be known since secrecy was vital to the owner—constructed bomb or fallout shelters. Your students will form families of the 1950s and decide, once the attack seems imminent, what to do about aggressive neighbors, their food supplies, and what to stock in their shelters to while away the hours until they reemerge days or weeks later.

Setup

1. Duplication

- **Background Essay**—class set
- **Postscript**—class set

2. **Schematic, props, set, costumes:** Study the **Schematic** carefully. Make a simulated, three-dimensional “bomb shelter” out of cardboard. (Refrigerator boxes are ideal.) Place obstacles nearby (see the **Schematic**) so that family members will have to “crawl underground” to enter and leave it. Finally, if possible, encourage students to bring to class props and costumes that will help create a 1952 ambiance. Students will likely enjoy helping make the shelter and experience more real.

3. Roles

- a. This Activator consists of four five-member families. There are no leadership roles or historical roles to fill. Each family will have a father, mother, and two or three children/youths.
- b. It is recommended that you place at least one capable/dependable student in each family to role-play a 1950s dad or mom. All family members will discuss the list of items from which to stock their shelters and respond to at least one of the questions Ed Murrow on the *Person to Person* TV show asks the family.

4. **Narrator(s):** This Activator has no narrator. The basic strategy is to have 1950s families—one at a time—“go into” a fallout shelter where members will be interviewed by TV’s Edward R. Murrow, who will ask each family five to six questions while members are “underground.”

Teaching tip

If you have major elections on your campus, you could round up some large voting booths to use for this and other Activators throughout the year.



Directions

1. Hand out the **Background Essay** either the day before as homework or on this first day. To check students' reading, briefly question their comprehension of its contents. **Note:** *If you have a younger group or students with reading problems, you may wish to spend time while you and other students read the essay aloud. In such a case you should also check for understanding.*
2. Display the **Schematic**, explain it, assign family roles (dad, mom, two to three kids), and if you haven't set up a bomb shelter set/corner yet, have some students help you do this. As you do, have the families meet in their groups to devise answers to the Edward R. Murrow questions you have put on the board or passed out to them. Here are the six questions:
 - Why did you build your bomb shelter?
 - How long do you think you'll be down in your bomb shelter?
 - What essentials do you have in the shelter to sustain life? Show us.
 - What other items do you have there to make life in the shelter tolerable, to while away the long hours? Show us.
 - How will you react to less prepared neighbors who panic at the last moment and want to enter your unit?
 - What kind of world above do you expect to experience when you emerge days or weeks from now, if the Russians and Americans have been lobbing atomic bombs at one another's cities for days?
3. You may use either **Option A** or **Option B** below, but regardless, begin by following these three paragraphs.

Say: "Everyone—Take any hats off, sit up straight, hands on top of desks, feet together, please. *(Pause)* Now everyone. *(Pause)* Drop! Drop under your desks . . . Duck and cover!" *(Encourage all students to get under their desks—you too! Insist that there is quiet. Require that they remain in the protective, fetal position for 30 seconds.)*

"All right. Everyone back up. *(Pause)* What you've experienced—along with some classroom deportment from a 1952 school—was not unlike a drill school children all over America were subjected to as a preventative measure in case the Russians dropped an atomic bomb in their vicinity.

"At that time it seemed America was deadlocked with the USSR in a battle for the planet. That meant ever-increasing amounts of defense dollars to build bigger and better weapons to force the Russians not



Teaching tip

Filming each family's responses to these questions and then playing the complete video should provide insight and humor during the debriefing.



Teaching tip

This little sponge activity should help motivate your families for the task that follows.

Narration

With the example of the Greensboro sit-in at Woolworth's in early February 1960, plans now were put forth to stage similar demonstrations all over the South. Besides Woolworth's, other national chains of so-called "dime stores" such as Kress, some with several stores in each city, became targets for sit-ins. Here was the sit-in scenario: walk in, sit down at the lunch counter, politely request food or drink (usually coffee—the college student's drink of choice), remain at the counter on the bar stool or swivel chair when refused service, and above all, *keep silent*.

If the Greensboro sit-in was somewhat spontaneous, the one planned for Nashville in late February was not. Students who had decided to stage the Nashville protest against lunch counter segregation had attended Jim Lawson's workshop on nonviolence. Lawson was an older African American with experience in Gandhian passive resistance in India. There he had refused to fight in the Korean War. Back in the states he had trained and educated Nashville's black students to never fight back, to love their oppressor, and to absorb, if necessary, the body blows from hostile forces. His message: "Respond in dignity."

On February 18, students from Nashville's four black colleges staged their first sit-in downtown. Diane Nash, a 22-year-old from Chicago, was one of two hundred who sat down at the segregated lunch counter that day. Along with John Lewis, C. T. Vivian, and Leo Lillard, she was "wall-to-wall terrified" of being not only a lawbreaker but also a victim of physical violence—although no sit-in as yet had generated a confrontation. Nash, who would soon be recognized as a leader and the articulate spokesperson for the demonstration, thought this first sit-in in Nashville was almost comical, even laughable. Nervous waitresses kept dropping dishes and all the other employees were confused. Moderate white reaction in Nashville produced comments such as: "These are agitators from up North" and "These are not our blacks."

Day after day for more than a week, the sit-in ritual was played out by these dedicated, well-trained, and inspired students. But on February 27, a Saturday, Diane Nash's fears were justified when violence actually erupted, even though this particular sit-in had begun like all the earlier ones.

The students walk in, sit down at all available lunch counter swivel chairs, order lunch or coffee, and are soon told by the waitresses that "We don't serve you coloreds here." The demonstrators sit passively until another supporter dashes into the counter area and announces the imminent arrival of an angry gang of white hoods. (*Pause*)

Within minutes these teenage toughs come through the front door of the dime store and walk downstairs to the lunch counters. Some of Nashville's police force walk among them as if to watch what happens rather than prevent an outbreak. The mob of whites approach the swivel chairs, stop, and hover around the fearful students in silence. (*Pause*) Everyone senses an explosion is about to happen. Suddenly, the thugs shout racial slurs and epithets to the seated students, who stare straight ahead, and neither speak nor turn around.

This non-action disturbs the toughs. *(Pause)* Suddenly several grab the shirts and jackets of the protesters, hit them, and try to pull them away from the stools. Many students have locked their legs around the bolted-down chairs, yet, this does not prevent the students from taking blow after blow to the head, neck, and abdomen from the white mob.

One black student is pried away from his stool, and because he is being beaten with fists, he assumes a fetal position on the floor. Still he is kicked, slugged, and spit on. Two more black students have cigarette butts ground into their necks. They wince, but do not turn around to confront or attack their oppressors. Three thugs then grab bottles and jars of catsup and mustard off the lunch counter and begin dousing the students, who remarkably still remain immobile.

As this action occurs, the police still do nothing. A few even smile at the proceedings. *(Pause)* Minutes later, one police officer steps forward. "Okay," he says, "all you blacks, get up from the lunch counter, or we're going to arrest ya for disturbing the peace." *(Pause)* "Everybody's under arrest."

Most of the students comply with the officer's request, but as they stand up and are escorted away to the wagons outside, something wondrous happens. A second wave of demonstrators slide into the vacated seats and sit quietly. So, another officer and his fellow policemen arrest this second group and lead them upstairs and out the door to the police vans which are now bulging with demonstrators. As this happens, a third wave of students sits down. They, too, will be arrested by the perplexed police. Still others are waiting outside, prepared to fill the counter seats.

The gang of white teens who instigated the confrontation and caused an outbreak are left behind smirking and basking in their success.



Counter segment where Greensboro students staged a civil rights sit-in protest on display in the National Museum of American History in Washington DC.

Historical Investigation Activity

Sit-In Demonstration (1960)



Focus Question

The Nashville sit-in protesters: Did they faithfully and effectively apply the passive resistance tactics of Thoreau, Gandhi, and King?

Materials Needed for This Historical Investigation

- **Documents A–H**—class set
- **Points to Ponder Response Sheet**—class set

Lesson Plan

1. Getting Started

- Ask students, “Now that we have studied the Brown Supreme Court case and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, we’re going to move on to an analysis of the Nashville sit-in, another vital event in the civil rights movement.”
- Continue, “Let me ask you this: If you wanted to change the food that was served in the school cafeteria from regular fare to a more healthful cuisine and your efforts to make this change by talking to school officials had failed miserably, what other options would be open to you?” Discuss the same options open to supporters of civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s: boycotts, demonstrations, picketing, petitions, sit-ins, protests, etc. Hopefully, students will offer these choices during the discussion. Ask, “Which options and strategies do you see on TV newscasts or on streets in your own city/town? What are the usual issues? Are these efforts usually successful?” Discuss.

2. Backstory to Use as Instruction

- Many believe that African Americans of the 1950s and 1960s achieved many of their civil rights by applying the principles of passive resistance and civil disobedience. Time and time again, from the Montgomery bus boycott through the sit-ins, freedom rides, marches, demonstrations, and protests, African American leaders utilized the same tactics that proved successful for centuries in helping to secure basic rights, better treatment, or equal justice under the law.
- Passive resistance is the practice of achieving goals through symbolic protests, civil disobedience, and economic or political non-cooperation without resorting to violence.

Historical Investigation Activity



- The civil rights movement had decades—even centuries—of shining examples in front of them. The philosophy and theory of passive resistance and civil disobedience goes back to classical and biblical origins. A brief list might include:
 - Jesus' "love your enemy" and "turn the other cheek" from the Bible
 - The American Revolution came about as a result of civil disobedient defiance to excessive taxes and lack of representation. Aroused colonists boycotted, marched, and demonstrated their disapproval of "tyrannical laws."
 - Henry David Thoreau's tax protest against the United States waging the Mexican War and the expansion of slavery
 - Women's suffrage in both the United States and Britain in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
 - Irish nationalists resisting British rule by refusing to pay taxes and by setting up alternative local governments
 - Gandhi's leadership in protesting British rule in South Africa and India
 - Norwegians in World War II using non-cooperation strategies, distancing themselves from the occupying German army and distributing illegal newspapers
 - U.S. draft resisters during the Vietnam War, refusing to cooperate with the Selective Service System by misrepresenting their physical or mental condition to the draft board, disrupting draft procedures, going "underground," going to jail, leaving the country, or serving in alternative jobs
 - More recently: Czechoslovakia (1968); Egypt (2011); Occupy Wall Street (2011); and in 2013 in Turkey, the Ukraine, and Hong Kong
 - Here at home, familiar protests are common over school budgets, labor disputes, and abortion. (Our First Amendment provides for peaceable assembly.)
- These same tactics were quickly adopted by leaders of the civil rights movement. The bus boycott in Montgomery showed that passive resistance and civil disobedience can work effectively. Thanks to the historical antecedents above, leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and James Lawson, both of whom had been to India and studied Gandhi's beliefs and his application of "active" passive resistance provided wisdom to others.