

## Exhibit Showcases Cold War Curricula

By Juliet R Bailin, CRIMSON STAFF WRITER November 10, 2011

Classroom 251 is not one of the Science Center's normal teaching spaces. Visitors are immediately transported into the post-World War II era as they walk into "Cold War In the Classroom," the History of Science Department's newest special exhibit, on display until December 16 of this year.

The classroom exhibit is filled with the howl of air raid sirens from a sound installation in the ceiling. Nine old, wooden desks face a teacher's desk flanked by an American flag. Display cases boast a 1936 A.C. Gilbert Chemistry Set complete with radium and a 1950 world map whose cartographers' labeled next to the Philippines: "a suitable place to sink all Communistic ideas."

The purpose of this classroom is to educate visitors about American science curricula during the Cold War.

"This was a period of intense competition, or believed competition, with the Soviet Union," Guest Curator and History of Science Lecturer Christopher J. Phillips said.

Phillips and his co-curator Jeremy T. Blatter, a graduate student in the History of Science Department, developed the idea for the exhibit last fall.

"We wanted to remind people how pervasive this sort of curricula ... ended up being in the period," Phillips said. "It was not just for the best students. It was intended for all students."

Phillips added that professors at Harvard and MIT developed much of the Cold War science curricula. Gerald Holton, emeritus professor of History of Science and Physics, wrote one of the physics textbooks on display.

"The goal in the period was largely to get the best scientists and mathematicians to be designing the high school and elementary school curricula," Phillips said.

In addition to its artifact display, the exhibit presents a digital film collection. Resting on one of the desks is an iPad with an application developed by metaLAB (at) Harvard that allows visitors to watch nearly 100 archival films.

In the back of the exhibit, visitors can also watch a 1952 film projected titled "Duck and Cover." The film stars an alert turtle named Bert who retreats into his shell during nuclear fallout.

"The combination of incredibly stark, dark images of nuclear fear mixed with a remarkably silly soundtrack ... it's [a] complicated experiment," Blatter said. "A lot of people who are older have seen this film."

Older visitors also recognize the exhibit's artifacts from their own childhoods. Blatter said many identified a toy rocket on display as the model they used to own.

"It's a VX rocket, a military object with the intention to kill," Phillips said. "There's a way in which the mundane was linked with the very scary."

Blatter said that visitors should sit at both a student and teacher desk to consider the different classroom perspectives and “live a historical thought experiment.”

According to Phillips, pedagogical changes made during the Cold War—such as the emphasis on hands-on learning over rote memorization—persist in modern classrooms.

“In some ways, we’re still experiencing the legacy of the Cold War curricula,” he said.

On December 14 from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., a panel discussion about the collection will be held in the exhibit space. The Harvard Film Archive will also be sponsoring a screening of an original 16mm science education film that Blatter will select.