*The front **(above left)** and back **(left)**, of an undated Cheerios box advertising free "Plastic Model U.S. Army Guided Missile and Launcher" set found inside. Given that the Nike missile on the box most closely resembles that of a Nike Ajax missile, the box was most likely sold sometime in the mid fifties. Images courtesy of Tick Tock Toys - Archives and Galleries (online).*

against those who may carry one out (i.e. the Soviet Union). The primary concern for the U.S. Defense Department at the time was the protection of the continental U.S. from nuclear equipped, Soviet long-range bomber aircraft, not missiles. Military aircraft in the 1950's were becoming significantly faster, flying higher, and with the advent of nuclear weapons, much more deadly. As a result, traditional Army flak based anti-aircraft artillery was rapidly becoming obsolete.

The answer was in guided missiles. Dubbed "Nike" after the mythological Greek goddess of victory, the Nike missile went through numerous iterations throughout the length of its career, but only two saw actual service. With its deployment beginning in 1953, the original Nike Ajax (MIM-3) was the first guided, surface-to-air missile ever put into service. Its development started as far back as the Second World War. It carried a traditional (non-nuclear) high explosive warhead, and a single missile could successfully take out a single enemy aircraft up to thirty miles away. The Ajax however had several major flaws, the most significant of which was its inability to knock out more than one enemy aircraft. The rectification of those flaws led to the development of a second Nike missile, the Hercules (MIM-14). Rolled out to Nike missile sites beginning in 1958, the Hercules was designed specifically to carry a small nuclear warhead (though many were outfitted solely with traditional high explosives). With a much-improved range of ninety six miles, the idea behind the Nike Hercules was that it would not only be able to take out whole formations of enemy aircraft, but could disable enemy nuclear weapons as well. Its warhead, the W-31, was a relatively small yield nuclear weapon and was considered to be more stable (less accident prone) than its predecessors. The W-31 of course underwent testing, but the device and the Hercules were never actually tested together at the altitude in which they would have been put to use. Regardless, potential nuclear fallout from a Nike missile exploding over a U.S. city was considered to be minimal, and whatever harm a nuclear Nike explosion might cause was determined to be preferable over a Soviet one. All in all, the Nike missile (both Ajax and Hercules) were really intended to be last ditch efforts.

Living next to nuclear weapons naturally made the public feel uneasy, and public safety concerns over living in close proximity to the missiles were not unwarranted. Accidents at Nike sites had occurred. A rogue Ajax was accidently fired from Washington D.C. site W-13 at Fort Meade, MD in 1955. It was detonated over the Baltimore-Washington Parkway without causing any harm or damage. Those present at another incident in New Jersey would not be so lucky. In 1958, an Ajax exploded on the ground at site NY-53 and killed ten people, four of them civilians. Finding land sufficient to house a Nike site posed problems with the public as well. Each site had to be within 25 miles of the center of the area it protected. A typical Nike missile site generally was made up of three parts: a launch site, a control site, and a radar site. In most instances the radar and control sites were situated together, resulting usually in two, but sometimes three separate installations that made up a single site. In addition to several other strict requirements, all sections of a site had to be somewhere within 1,000 to 6,000 yards apart. Thus, a Nike site required a very specific and very significant tract of land. Preferring to use federal government owned land (that of which met Nike requirements rarely existed), the Army was forced in most cases to obtain private or local government owned land. Needless to say, this rarely went over well, and the Army's practice of condemning land in order to acquire it did not help.

The Pentagon knew that for these reasons, convincing the public to accept the nearby placement of the Nikes would be a challenge. They readily provided information to the press, held local community outreach meetings, displayed the missiles for all to see on Armed Forces Day, and marketed the Nike on products such as cereal boxes. Lassie even got involved in a 1963 episode appropriately titled "The Patriot". For some it worked. Many determined that the Army confiscation of property and the risk of an accident outweighed the alternative, but not everybody bought in.

Not Bad Neighbors...If You're a Farmer
(Or a Prison)

The nations capital was fortunate in that its surrounding terrain allowed for mostly an ideal placement of its Nike installations. Its ring of Nike sites was joined with that of Baltimore's, forming a