

Civil Defense, 1955

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Civil Defense, 1955

Although the primary justification for the Interstate System involved civilian benefits, its value for defense purposes was another important factor. A particular concern was the need to evacuate cities if an atomic bomb were on the way.

In the 1950's, the issue of evacuation was not in any sense frivolous at the height of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. For example, while President Dwight D. Eisenhower began lobbying congressional leaders on behalf of the highway proposal he would submit on February 22, 1955, he was preoccupied with the Formosa Straits crisis that erupted when the People's Republic of China appeared ready to cross the straits and attack Chinese Nationalists on Formosa (now called Taiwan) over control of the islands of Quemoy and Matsu. This was a major international crisis, as illustrated by Eisenhower biographer Stephen E. Ambrose's observation that, "the United States in early 1955 came closer to using atomic weapons than at any other time in the Eisenhower Administration."

For the President, the Formosa crisis illustrated the need for the Interstate System. He worried about evacuating Washington and other cities in the event of a nuclear attack. He knew the present roads were inadequate for that purpose. Still, in a meeting with legislative leaders on January 11, 1955, the Formosa crisis prompted a discussion of what would happen in the event of a nuclear attack on the United States. The President said he was worried about an atomic bomb attack, which prompted him to suggest the need for a plan to relocate Congress in an emergency.

March 11, 1955

On March 11, 1955, the same day that General Lucius D. Clay testified before the Senate Committee on Public Works, Civil Defense Administrator Val Peterson told a Senate Armed Services Subcommittee that all citizens should build some sort of underground shelter "right now," stocked with sufficient food and water to last 5 or 6 days. His recommendation was based on knowledge of what a hydrogen bomb might do when intercontinental guided missiles are perfected. When that happens, he said, "we had all better dig and pray. In fact, we had better be praying right now."

His testimony was prompted by a complaint from Massachusetts Governor Christian A. Herter, who said the Federal Government was keeping the States in the dark on how to protect their populations from radiation fallout. The Governor had stated:

For example, we have no idea whether or not raincoats are preferable to cloth coats, whether hands or faces should be kept covered, whether or not riding in an automobile with all windows closed provides a degree of protection, and whether or not radioactive particles permeate windows or the walls of buildings, or seep into cellars.

In short, he said, the States could not take "even the simplest" precautions. "Decisions have got to be made at the Federal level, and made very quickly."

Peterson expressed the view that evacuation was the only practical solution. "It's much better to get people out, even if in the process you may kill some of them or damage property. It's better to do that than to have millions of Americans just stay there and be killed."

On this same day, Governors Averell Harriman (New York), Robert B. Meyner (New Jersey), and Abraham A. Ribicoff (Connecticut) met with Mayor Robert Wagner of New York City to discuss plans for evacuating the city in the case of a hydrogen bomb attack. A report by the Mayor's Special Committee on Civil Defense estimated that 1 million people

could be moved from the worst danger zones in an hour by rail, subway, and ferryboat. Another 4 million would have to be evacuated by bus, taxi, truck, and automobile along 200 outgoing traffic lanes.

Under conditions of great congestion and confusion, these lanes might accommodate only about 1,000,000 people. Thus, until more efficient use of transportation and more than one hour's warning can be assured, about 3,000,000 people, or 37 percent of the city's 8,000,000 population might be balked in any attempt to escape the target area except by walking.

The report also estimated that 400,000 people an hour could be moved out of Manhattan in 75,000 to 100,000 available vehicles, aside from mass transportation facilities. In addition, if evacuation was not possible, 2,411,855 people could be accommodated on subway platforms serving as emergency shelters.

As illustrated by these activities on the day of General Clay's testimony, the idea of evacuating cities was by no means unusual. Still, doubt existed about whether evacuation would prove to be practical if needed. In questioning General Clay, Senator Pat McNamara (D-MI), who was from Detroit, observed that when one crash occurs on a freeway, 10 cars pile up. "This is just normal driving, and they are not running scared for their lives." He couldn't "visualize it lasting for 10 minutes as a means of escape" and said he would "use the alleys rather than use the superhighway" in the face of a pending atomic attack.

Operation Alert

The possibility of urban evacuation was put to the test on June 15, 1955, when the Federal Civil Defense Administration staged Operation Alert in cities around the country, including Washington, D.C. As *The New York Times* observed on June 16, "This was the first Civil Defense test in which the Government actually left Washington and in which account was taken of the lethal and widespread effects of radioactive fall-out." The government was able to estimate the spread of fallout because it had exploded a hydrogen bomb on March 1, 1954, in the Bikini Atoll in the central Pacific Ocean. The test revealed that the fallout spread 7,000 square miles over the Pacific. "On land," the *Times* explained, "that fall-out would have killed virtually every exposed person in an area about the size of New Jersey."

Operation Alert targeted 55 cities in the continental United States, plus 6 in its territories. Of these cities, 13 had no advance notice that they would be included. Atomic and hydrogen bombs were presumed to strike the East Coast, including New York City, the West Coast, and parts of the Midwest. The coordinated attacks began in New Bedford, Massachusetts, at 1:22 pm. Two minutes later, attacks occurred in Providence, Rhode Island, and Boston, followed at 1:26 pm by attacks in southern California. A five megaton thermonuclear bomb struck New York City. (The *Times* helpfully informed its surviving readers that this was the equivalent of 5 million tons of TNT.) A second megaton thermonuclear bomb hit Chicago.

The estimates of devastation were extensive, as reported in the *Times*:

Vital centers of the nation were under the assumed blight of radioactive fall-out from hydrogen bombs that could paralyze them for weeks.

In a recapitulation tonight, the Federal Civil Defense Administration estimated assumed casualties at 5,000,000 killed and almost 5,000,000 injured. It also estimated that 10,000,000 persons had been made homeless, creating serious welfare problems.

The *Times* added that the results of the test "ranged from indifference and confusion in some cities to well-disciplined drills and even evacuations." In New York City, according to the *Times*, most people went indoors for 10 minutes when sirens signaled the start of the drill. However, the all-clear siren rang prematurely, sending the public back into the streets 4 minutes early. A baseball game at Yankee Stadium was delayed 23 minutes, but the 17,000 spectators remained in their seats throughout. Wall Street suspended trading for the drill. Governor Harriman took shelter in the

Port Authority Building at 111 Eighth Avenue, but repeated his concern that the Eisenhower Administration "has not yet informed me what is expected of a Governor" and "has not kept pace with scientific development" since 1950.

Arrests for nonparticipation in New York City included 28 pacifists staging a sit-down demonstration in City Hall Park. Police also arrested a pedestrian who refused to go into a shelter in Harlem and a truck driver who would not leave his truck in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Results around the country varied. Philadelphia, one of the cities that had not been warned it would be targeted, was hit by an H-bomb, but public participation was reported to be spotty. Some motorists stopped when sirens began blaring, but most kept moving. Similarly, most pedestrians kept walking. A small number of people in Denver, about 2,400, were evacuated to the mountains, while Houston officials were satisfied with the evacuation of a 275-block downtown area. In Atlanta, Honolulu, and Los Angeles, government workers headed for shelters, but the rest of the population ignored the sirens. A report on the Los Angeles exercise indicated "considerable confusion, some panic, and a number of traffic problems, but, basically, the population responded well."

In Peoria, Illinois, which was included in the test when a simulated radioactive dust cloud from Chicago blanketed the city, civil defense officials refused to participate. The Director of Civil Defense preferred to let his volunteers work at their regular jobs instead of asking them to take a day off to "run around with arm bands on."

In Washington, an H-bomb was dropped on the city. With advance warning of the attack, President Eisenhower left the White House by automobile just after noon and headed for a secret destination in Virginia. The *Times* explained:

En route through the Capital, the cavalcade found traffic was not heavy although 15,000 Government workers were being evacuated. Although the President's route and destination were secret, children along the road shouted, "Hey, Ike," as the President's car passed.

Shortly after the President left the White House, sirens began warning the city of the impending attack, scheduled for a little after 3:25 pm. In his speeding Cadillac, the President signed a proclamation that concluded:

Now, therefore, I, Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the aforesaid Federal Civil Defense Act of 1950, do hereby proclaim the existence of a state of Civil Defense emergency.

In witness whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States of America to be affixed.

Word was radioed from the Cadillac to Federal Civil Defense Administrator Peterson that the President had signed the proclamation.

A few other high level officials also left their posts early to evacuate before the attack. One of them was Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson, who attributed his early departure from the Pentagon to "superior intelligence" information. Other high level officials evacuated after the warning sirens began to signal the emergency. Only one Cabinet Member, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, failed to participate. He stayed in his office throughout the H-bomb attack and left at 4 pm for New York.

The members of Congress remained in the Capitol and conducted business as usual. Although the President had talked to congressional leaders in January about the need for an evacuation point, the Congress still had no secret center where the business of the legislature could be carried on in the event of an attack.

The only real casualty of Operation Alert was a Deputy Director for Civil Defense of the District of Columbia, who refused to participate in the evacuation. He called the exercise ridiculous, saying it was not a "drill but a show." He was fired.

Speeding along at 70 miles per hour, the President's car passed several other evacuees, including Herbert Hoover Jr., Under Secretary of State, and Joseph M. Dodge, White House foreign economic advisor. Still, some leaders reached the secret rendezvous ahead of the President. The *Times* reported that:

One of the first to greet the President at the sunny relocation headquarters was George M. Humphrey, the Secretary of the Treasury, who had driven in his own black limousine.

"What did you do-come down here to see if the money was safe?" the President asked Secretary Humphrey with a grin, as they walked along a gravel road together

From the emergency relocation center, the President broadcast a message to the American people. "We are here," he said, "to determine whether or not the Government is prepared in time of emergency to continue the function of government so that there will be no interruption in the business that must be carried on." The Nation's television and radio networks, which had not expected the address, had only an hour's warning to prepare for its broadcast. As a result, only the NBC and DuMont television networks broadcast the President's remarks live. It was carried, however, on the major radio networks, including NBC and CBS.

Following a 90-minute meeting with top officials, President Eisenhower headed to his own secret emergency hideout in a caravan of five automobiles. The *Times* described the secret location as "a mountainous wooded area within 300 miles of Washington."

For Operation Alert, the Federal Civil Defense Administration had gathered more than 100 reporters at the Emergency Press Headquarters to spread news of the mock disaster to the population. However, the exercise primarily demonstrated that the government and the media would have to improve coordination. Even before the exercise began, one metropolitan reporter had revealed the location of the secret press center; he had been out-of-town when the other reporters had been briefed about the importance of secrecy. "Not that it would have mattered greatly," the *Times* observed. "Reporters arriving last night could stand in a local hotel lobby and overhear the bellboys telling each other what was about to happen."

News from the Emergency Press Headquarters was slow to arrive, so the reporters strolled to a press bulletin board where they could read wire service reports of the nationwide attacks hours before official announcements were made. As the *Times* put it, "The wags are saying of today's Civil Defense test that everything is simulated but the confusion."

Although Operation Alert had its comical elements, an editorial in the *Times* declared the first nationwide test evacuation a success in demonstrating that a real attack could kill millions of men, women and children "in a holocaust that makes the imagination falter." With Soviet Foreign Minister V. M. Molotov in New York City on the day of the test (he left the city early for the Soviet's estate at Glen Cove on Long Island), the editorial continued:

This [threat of a holocaust] makes "Operation Alert" far more than a test and converts it into a dramatic demonstration to all-including, it may be hoped, Mr. Molotov, who happens to be among us at the moment-of the deadly menace that hangs over the world today. This demonstration gives new emphasis to President Eisenhower's dictum that war no longer presents the possibility of victory or defeat, but only the alternative of varying degrees of destruction, and that there is no substitute for a just and lasting peace.

A New Generation

The Congress did eventually get its own evacuation center, a \$14 million bunker with 800 beds to house military and congressional leaders in a nuclear emergency. The center's location was kept secret until reporter Ted Gup revealed the story in *The Washington Post Magazine* on May 31, 1992. It had been built under the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia.

The *Post* considered killing the story as recommended by congressional leaders and representatives of the security community. However, top editors and publisher Katherine Graham decided to publish the article after concluding, as Gup's sources said, the evacuation center was a "self-perpetuating anachronism." Thomas Mallon, in a September 2000 article in *American Heritage* magazine ("Mr. Smith Goes Underground"), explained that:

Gup's sources further insisted that the evacuation of Congress could never be accomplished quickly enough once war became truly imminent-not even using the airport built in nearby Lewisburg, West Virginia, in the sixties. On top of everything, members of Congress would simply have declined to go in any case-not when their spouses and children would be left behind at ground zero. (Tip O'Neill, the former House Speaker, told Gup he always found the idea farfetched.)

The story of the bunker under the exclusive resort set off a media frenzy:

Print journalists and television news crews descended on the Greenbrier, and within 24 hours of publication, Speaker Tom Foley sent Secretary of Defense Richard B. Cheney a letter that recommended "ending support" for the compromised bunker.

With several recent scandals having damaged the reputation of Congress, Mallon said, "members of both parties rushed to disassociate themselves from the bunker, whose connection to the Greenbrier led people hearing the first reports of it to imagine a posh retreat in which a select few citizens could ride out nuclear winter."

The times, as Mallon noted in his September 2000 article, had changed since the days when officials worried about evacuation of the Nation's cities:

Each month now, somewhere in North Dakota, three or four obsolete Minuteman III missile silos get blown up. In Baltimore, the alert sirens that for nearly 50 years were tested each Monday afternoon are now sounded only once a month, after residents complained about the nuisance. Serving the traveler nostalgic for apocalypse, the Bureau of Atomic Tourism's Web site has links to the Los Alamos County Historical Museum, the Bikini atoll, and the Greenbrier bunker.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concerns of the Cold War generation seemed outdated when those words were published in September 2000. A year later, September 11, 2001, provided another perspective. On that day, terrorists flew two airplanes into the Twin Towers in New York City, causing them to collapse, and a third airplane exploded into the Pentagon, causing major damage. A fourth airplane appeared to be headed for a destination, as yet unknown, in Washington when a struggle between passengers and the terrorists caused it to crash in Pennsylvania. In real time, residents and workers in Lower Manhattan and workers in Washington evacuated their offices amid rumors of additional attacks that made the jammed highways, the disjointed subway service, indeed any delay all the more frustrating.

Americans today, living in a time of color coded terror alerts, have begun to understand how an earlier generation lived in fear.
