

AN ISSUE FOR THE PEOPLE: CIVIL DEFENSE IN THE NUCLEAR AGE

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Does the United States need a civil defense system? In the following article, Jonathan Mostow emphatically argues against the Reagan Administration's attempts to revive a national civil defense program and the false security which it engenders. The "city evacuation" concept is a mere update of the bomb shelter mentality of the 1950s, and no more effective now than it was then. Implementation of this policy would risk economic collapse, tempt the Soviets in the dangerous game of nuclear brinkmanship and undermine rather than contribute to national security. Speculating on potential scenarios and responses, Mostow unmasks the fatal logic of civil defense and reaffirms the validity of mutually assured destruction doctrine as a basis for preventing nuclear war.

The bewildering changes in military technology, especially in the area of nuclear weapons, have made it increasingly difficult for the public to participate in decisions on nuclear strategy, leaving these issues in the hands of an elite corps of specialists. Civil defense, however, is a concept that everyone can grasp. Unfortunately, only a small segment of the population has given the subject much thought. Ronald Reagan has called for an unprecedented \$4.2 billion civil defense campaign to match alleged Soviet capabilities. To a great extent, the success or failure of his proposal in Congress will depend on the public's understanding of this important issue.

The Reagan Administration remains convinced of the need for civil defense despite numerous studies which have disproven the feasibility of such programs.¹ Indeed, outside of the Administration, most officials in government and the private sector believe that civil defense is futile against nuclear attack.

Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara recently stated, "I know of no form of civil defense which would permit the nation to 'recover'

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1. Several major studies which have disproven the feasibility of civil defense against nuclear attack are the following: "Retaliatory Issues for the U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces," (Washington, D.C. Congressional Budget Office, 1978), "Soviet Civil Defense," Central Intelligence Agency, Director of Central Intelligence (Washington: 1978).

from such an attack." Another former Secretary of Defense, Harold Brown, voiced the same conviction: "The United States and the Soviet Union would not survive an all-out strategic war as viable societies at any level of civil defense that has been contemplated."²

An analysis of the current debate reveals a range of viewpoints. Civil defense opponents have focused their criticisms on questions of feasibility. They assert that the United States should not have civil defense simply because it does not work. Advocates start from a different premise: they contend that a U.S. civil defense program — regardless of feasibility — is necessary to correct a growing strategic imbalance between the United States and the Soviet Union.

While overwhelming evidence suggests that civil defense in the nuclear age is a moot issue, the key questions are whether the Soviet leadership has confidence in the efficacy of their own civil defense system and how that perception affects the dynamic strategic balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. As Harold Brown noted, "What counts is what Soviet civilian and military leaders believe."³

Do the Soviets believe their civil defenses will work? On this matter the experts disagree. According to Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, a former Special Assistant to the National Security Council, "the Soviets have shown that they believe civil defense to be a critical element in deterrence. Given their belief, *whether warranted or not*, in the efficacy of civil defense, they can only perceive the United States as being weaker for the absence of such a program."⁴ (Emphasis added.) The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) reported annual Soviet civil defense expenditures of \$2 billion.⁵ Dr. Leon Goure, Director for the Center for Soviet Studies at Science Applications, puts the figure much higher — closer to \$6 billion.⁶ Goure notes, "Soviet leaders are unlikely to invest such a large amount of relatively scarce resources year after year in a program unless they are really convinced of its utility."⁷

Admiral Noel Gaylor, former Director of the National Security Agency, argues to the contrary that "qualified Russian observers concede that

2. *United States and Soviet Civil Defense Programs*, Hearings before the Subcommittee on Arms Control, Oceans, International Operations and Environment of the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, 97th Congress, March 16 and 31, p. 74 (1982).

3. *Department of Defense Annual Report for Fiscal Year 1979*, Washington, D.C., February 2, 1978, p. 5.

4. "Civil Defense for the 1980s," Testimony of Samuel P. Huntington, Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, U.S. Senate, January 8, 1979, p. 10.

5. "Soviet Civil Defense," p. 3.

6. *U.S. and Soviet Civil Defense Programs*, p. 92. The higher figure accounts for equipment for twenty million part time personnel, training, stockpiling and protective measures for industry and transportation — important factors not included in the CIA estimate of \$2 billion.

7. *Ibid.*

Russian civil defense is a phony, a Potemkin village,"⁸ and that despite their enormous expenditures, "the Soviets assign relatively little value to their civil defense program in improving their strategic position."⁹

Suppose the Soviets actually believe in the advertised capabilities of their civil defense system; specifically, that they could significantly curtail damage to their industrial base and minimize fatalities to less than 10 percent of their total population. How would such a perceived strategic asymmetry affect Soviet decisionmaking?

Huntington asserts that a perceived U.S. vulnerability "can only encourage the Soviets to question the seriousness of U.S. purpose and hence also encourage them to follow a more adventurous policy."¹⁰ Physics Nobel laureate Eugene Wigner bluntly summarizes the prevailing fear of most civil defense advocates:

What I am most afraid of is not a war, but it is a new Munich, that the Russians would evacuate their cities, put their city defenses into effect, and then threaten us. . . . I don't know what they would demand, but it may be something like that unless we dismantle our Air Force, tomorrow 60 percent of our people will die.¹¹

For Wigner and his colleagues, the only sure safeguard against such a threat is a comparable U.S. civil defense system.

Suppose Wigner's far-fetched scenario were realized. How would the United States respond to a Soviet nuclear attack in the absence of a civil defense program? First, activation of Soviet civil defenses would take at least one week, providing the United States with ample time to put its forces on full alert.¹² The Soviets would therefore be forced to cope with a large U.S. retaliatory force consisting of most of its bombers and all operable submarines.

Second, the president could simply inform the Soviet premier that American nuclear forces had been retargeted against their evacuated population. According to Spurgeon Keeny of the National Academy of Sciences, retargeting "could drive up their fatalities to 75 or 80 million."¹³

Third, U.S. forces could ground-burst warheads to increase fallout. An Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) study predicted that

8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

10. "Civil Defense for the 1980s," p. 10.

11. *U.S. and Soviet Civil Defense Programs*, p. 20.

12. "Soviet Civil Defense," p. 3.

13. *U.S. and Soviet Civil Defense Programs*, p. 25.

"an idealized Soviet civil defense system employing massive urban evacuation and blast shelters" would sustain 40 to 50 million casualties from a ground-burst attack.¹⁴ The total number of deaths would actually be much higher; the ACDA study does not account for the intermediate, long term, and compounded effects of such a catastrophe.¹⁵

Of course, the United States could surprise the Russians with a first strike before their civil defense preparations could be completed. A preemptive counterforce strike would be the most effective means of damage limitation. Indeed, Wigner's proposed scenario would give the United States the incentive to strike first.

These alternatives — full alert, retargeting, ground-bursting, and first strike — achieve essentially the same strategic objectives as a U.S. civil defense system: namely, they effectively counteract Soviet civil defenses. Obviously, there are other less drastic alternatives available to both Soviet and American decisionmakers, such as diplomacy. In the long term, however, the best way to defeat Soviet civil defenses is to build more weapons. Shelters are costly and take years to construct; by comparison, missiles can be quickly and cheaply deployed. A shelter verses warhead competition is always won by the side deploying the most warheads.

So far, this scenario has considered a world in which only the Soviets have a civil defense system. What would happen if the United States were to acquire a comparable system? Ignoring the question of whether civil defense actually works, there are several strategic reasons for not instituting such a program in the United States.

First, false alarms are extremely costly. When international tensions rise and military confrontation appears imminent, U.S. strategic forces can be activated quickly and relatively inexpensively. If the confrontation does not occur, our forces can be deactivated with minimal adverse consequences and costs. Civil defenses, however, require at least a week to activate and would incur heavy social and economic costs.

In his recent book, *Life After Nuclear War*, Dr. Arthur Katz, a technical assessment specialist formerly at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, explores the economic effects of a pre-attack evacuation. Without dropping so much as a single bomb, or firing a single missile, he concludes that the Soviets could push the United States into a deep, long-term recession. In Katz's scenario, an evacuation of U.S. cities would set off a chain reaction of economic disasters.¹⁶

The initial result of a pre-attack evacuation of cities would be a substantial industrial slowdown — perhaps complete shutdown — and possibly massive

14. Ibid., p. 24.

15. Ibid., p. 25.

16. Arthur M. Katz, *Life After Nuclear War*, (Cambridge, MA: Ballantine, 1982), pp. 291-307.

unemployment over the long term. With the looming prospect of war, businesses would rush to liquidate inventories. The country would turn to a cash economy; all credit would disappear as suppliers demanded prepayment for goods and services. Banks would be swamped with withdrawals; the unemployed would drain savings accounts for desperately needed cash and foreign investors would hurry to pull out of the U.S. economy. Within days, major financial institutions would be forced to close and monetary transactions would cease. The price of gold would skyrocket as the value of the U.S. dollar plunged abroad. As the crisis intensified, the value of cash would plummet as people engaged in panic buying and hoarding. It is doubtful whether the government could maintain key industries such as utilities, sanitation, and transportation; essential workers would be likely to abandon their posts to join friends and families.

Unfortunately, a peaceful resolution to the conflict would not halt the economic decline. After the crisis, inventories would be depleted, creating a high demand for capital. With bank reserves depleted, however, there would be very little capital available for resuming production. The money shortage would be exacerbated by defaults on loans, bankruptcies, and high unemployment. The government would be forced to intervene to stave off total collapse and assist recovery. This would result in a domestic political struggle for the allocation of scarce financial resources. Assuming that the government had frozen assets during the evacuation, foreign investors would line up to withdraw whatever funds they had not removed before the financial shutdown. One could not begin to measure the worldwide impact of such an economic disaster in the United States.

What Katz describes is the *best-case scenario* in which no military action is taken! What if the crisis were to exceed two weeks? Ronald Reagan tells us that civil defense will cost \$4.2 billion; according to Katz, a single two week evacuation would carry a price tag in the hundreds of billions of dollars. The United States would be lucky to escape with a severe recession, let alone a crippling world depression.

The consequences of an evacuation would be less serious for the Soviet Union. Their planned economy facilitates rationing and centralized distribution of resources. Their citizens are already accustomed to shortages and government allocation of scarce commodities and consumer goods. Strategically, the United States is at a disadvantage. Indeed, the vulnerabilities of the American economy might encourage the Soviets to manufacture a crisis and trick the United States into evacuating its cities. After the American economy suffered extensive damage, the Soviets could ostensibly end the "crisis" in a position of strength, as the United States struggles to rebuild a shattered nation. Clearly, civil defense would be an unwieldy and costly component of U.S. strategic defenses.

Second, implementation of a civil defense system is difficult — if not impossible. The construction of a civil defense system and the design of evacuation plans is only the first step in correcting the alleged strategic imbalance. The Soviets must be led to believe that the United States has confidence in its system — that the American public would obey evacuation orders. The Soviets must be convinced that the United States is ready, willing and able to activate its civil defenses on short notice. The success of the U.S. civil defense program depends on the level of public support. Can one be sure that such support would exist?

Civil defense advocates assume that in time of crisis millions of Americans would cooperate with government instructions, but that assumption is entirely unsubstantiated. A recent poll conducted by the *Los Angeles Times* and *Cable News Network* revealed that 49 percent of those questioned considered civil defense “a waste of time and money.”¹⁷ Moreover, 53 percent of the respondents stated that they would not “want to survive an all-out nuclear war.”¹⁸ Citizens might prove reluctant to leave their homes; others might refuse to accommodate incoming evacuees. Civil defense cannot be forced on the public — citizen opposition to leadership policies could easily cripple even the best laid evacuation plans.

Moreover, the Soviets could go further and effectively disarm our civil defense system by arousing public distrust and skepticism through a series of false alarms. Imagine a scenario in which the Soviets evacuate their cities. The United States evacuates its cities in response. The Soviets return to their homes, explaining that the original evacuation was merely an exercise. Wigner admits that it would be “questionable whether our people would again accept the direction for counter-evacuation.”¹⁹

Third, civil defenses impair crisis management. Huntington argues that “a meaningful civil defense program could also help to maintain stability, provide additional options, and furnish additional time for negotiation during a major crisis.”²⁰ In reality, though, a full scale evacuation would *intensify* a crisis situation by adding new problems and creating a self-imposed deadline for resolution.

The activation of civil defenses would force decisionmakers to accept a particular time frame for action. The public could withstand adverse shelter and evacuation conditions only for a limited amount of time — one, two, perhaps three weeks.²¹ Without civil defenses, there is no race against

17. *Facts on File*, (New York, NY: Facts on File, Inc., 1982), p. 222.

18. *Ibid.*

19. William J. Lanouette, “The Best Civil Defense May be the Best — or Worst — Offense,” *National Journal*, (9 September 1978), p. 1423.

20. “Civil Defense for the 1980s,” p. 11.

21. Katz, *Life After Nuclear War*, pp. 291-307.

the clock. *With* civil defenses, the government would be under intense pressure to act; each day of delay would cause further damage to the economy.

Reflecting on the Cuban Missile Crisis, Robert Kennedy wrote that, "the time that was available to the President and his advisors to work secretly, quietly, privately, developing a course of action and recommendations for the President, was essential."²² The order to evacuate would expose high-level deliberations to public scrutiny and jeopardize crucial decisionmaking. "If our deliberations had been publicized," wrote Kennedy, "I believe the course that we ultimately would have taken would have been quite different and filled with far greater risks."²³

In theory, activation of U.S. civil defenses would serve an important function. By demonstrating American readiness to fight, civil defense would prevent war by adding credibility to the U.S. nuclear deterrent. In practice, however, this measure increases the likelihood of war and complicates the decisionmaking process for the President and his advisors. An evacuation might provide protection in case of attack, but only at the cost of increasing international tensions and the likelihood of resorting to war. The existence of a civil defense system forces the President to confront additional strategic and moral dilemmas and clearly jeopardizes crisis management.

Fourth, civil defense breeds a dangerous war-winning mentality. For 25 years, world peace has existed on the fundamental premise that neither superpower can survive a nuclear holocaust. Civil defense challenges the concept of mutually assured destruction and permits a country's leadership to consider the feasibility of winnable nuclear wars. The perception that civil defense would enable us to survive nuclear attack would create greater propensities for risk-taking and thereby inevitably increase the probability of war. Keeny summarizes the fears of many: "The reassuring notion that the nation could somehow quickly recover from an all-out nuclear war could encourage policies and actions which could in fact result in the complete destruction of our society, if not civilization as we know it."²⁴

Finally, a U.S. civil defense build-up is dangerous because it would bolster the Soviet Union's confidence in the effectiveness of its own system. The Soviet program is only a threat to the extent that the Russians believe that it would work. What greater affirmation could the United States provide than to build a system of its own? Instead, the United States should work to discredit the feasibility of civil defense efforts — Soviet and American. Ironically, the importance of civil defense is a function of

22. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, (New York, NY: Norton, 1971), p. 89.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *U.S. and Soviet Civil Defense Programs*, p. 24.

the attention it receives. According to a Carter Administration official, "the more attention we pay to it, the more tensions rise, making war more likely, not less."²⁵

Civil defense is an illusion. It cannot protect against nuclear attack, it is dangerous and costly, it is unwieldy and difficult to activate, it complicates crisis management and it generates the dangerous perception that nuclear war can be won. Strategically, technically and economically, implementation of a civil defense system makes no sense. Academics, military strategists and responsible citizens must pressure the Reagan Administration to abandon its grandiose and expensive schemes for evacuations and shelters. In the interim, Congress should actively oppose all civil defense proposals.

25. "The Best Civil Defense," p. 1424.