

ON THE ROAD FROM APOCALYPSE

by Louis René Beres

The United States is currently laboring for national security by wedding its nuclear strategy to an incomprehensibly futile set of policies. Among the separate elements of this set, none is more dangerous and misconceived than the "relocation option," also called Crisis Relocation Planning (CRP). What exactly is this option? According to an official statement, *Protection in the Nuclear Age* (Department of Defense, 1977):

Your Federal Government and many State and local governments are currently planning for the orderly relocation of people in time of an international crisis. These plans call for (1) allocating people from high-risk areas to go to appropriate low-risk host areas for reception and care, and for (2) developing and improvising fallout protection in the host areas.

High-risk areas are defined as metropolitan areas of fifty thousand or more population or those near major military installations. The safer areas, which would become "host areas" during emergency relocation, are described as the surrounding small-town or rural areas.

In keeping with its commitment to "orderliness," the Government of the United States has taken steps to ensure that relocation need not imply serious discomfort. Hence, a detailed set of instructions and a checklist for supplies have been provided, urging, *inter alia*, the secure transport of sanitary napkins, credit cards, and stocks and bonds. Moreover, relocation allegedly need not place serious strains upon normally functioning moral imperatives, since firearms, narcotics, and alcoholic beverages would be prohibited in the postapocalypse world.

What about the logistical problems of evacuation? How should we behave to avoid serious traffic snarls? Again, no problem. All the difficulties have been foreseen and their remedies carefully articulated:

If you get caught in a traffic jam, turn off your engine,

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remain in your car, listen for official instructions, and be patient. Do not get out of the line to find an alternative route. All routes will be crowded.

In Plattsburgh, New York, the authorities have devised a "model" evacuation plan that builds upon the insights of the Federal program. Hence, in the event of imminent nuclear war, the city's police department will assign two patrolmen to direct traffic at the corner of Broad and Cornelia. Dismissing the idea of using school crossing guards because it would be too difficult for them, the authorities approved a plan to employ civil defense volunteers, leaving the police to cover car accidents and fights between individuals. After all, in the expectation of a nuclear war, "People will be emotional."

With such contingency plans the pertinent agencies of the U.S. Government have dissolved the line between fantasy and sober assessment. To thus encourage public faith in an inherently nonviable civil defense establishment is wrong. And it is also contrary to our needs for survival. With its idea of evacuating "high-risk" metropolitan areas before a threatened nuclear attack and its claim that a well-coordinated plan for recovery ensures a quick return to normalcy of a devastated body politic, our government reveals an almost unimaginable misunderstanding of (or deliberately distorts) what the postwar environment would be like.

Get a New Yorker's reaction to the claim that his city may be evacuated effectively and in an orderly fashion during a crisis. The very notion is the stuff of political cabaret and cutting satire—not of intelligent public policy. When it is joined with "relocation checklists" that assume postattack normalcy, it descends to a level of absurdity beside which the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, and Genêt appear manifestly orthodox. As the effects of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki make clear, a superpower nuclear war would bring not only physical death but the death of hope.

Relocation is nothing more than the *reductio ad absurdum* of the nuclear arms race.* Such preparedness,

*One might wonder, however, whether relocation has an

rather than improving deterrence, will underscore Soviet fears of an American first strike. These fears, of course, have already been heightened by America's development and expansion of counterforce weapons systems, by the still-planned deployment of a new generation of intermediate-range ballistic missiles in selected NATO countries, and by the U.S. refusal to renounce "first use" of nuclear weapons.

Even if it could be assumed that large-scale U.S. civilian evacuation plans were workable and that a government-directed civilian exodus several days before a nuclear attack would not degenerate into chaos, a Soviet nuclear attack could still doom virtually every American. (Curiously, Department of Defense requests for improved strategic weapons systems almost always are premised on the assumption that we need protection from a sudden Soviet first strike—a contingency that would allow no time for evacuation—while the entire rationale of Crisis Relocation Planning rests on the assumption of several days' warning time.) According to Dr. Irwin Redlener, who has studied CRP for Physicians for Social Responsibility, civil defense calculations by American authorities are "based on little hard data." Ignoring the many important differences between evacuating a city in the face of a hurricane and evacuating one being flattened by a nuclear bomb, says Redlener, CRP is based entirely on highly questionable analogies:

...CRP makes the basic assumption that a warning time of one week is essential to effect any reasonable degree of evacuation and protection. This discounts any possibility of a surprise attack. The elimination of a presumptive attack scenario makes little sense even to traditional military planners.

CRP requires the evacuated families to shovel piles of dirt around the buildings to which they are assigned in order to make them "radiation safe" but doesn't speak to how this might be accomplished during the winter months in a northern climate. Even in the national "model" areas (such as Plattsburgh, New York) where it has been rather fully developed, there is no real provision for the management of hospitalized patients in the target sites or for the redirection of essential services such as food supply.

Finally, evacuating U.S. counterforce and other target sites carries the distinct possibility of provoking the war it claims it will protect us from. How would an adversary interpret such an evacuation? Could this mean the U.S. was preparing to deploy its first-strike weapons? If so, would not the Soviets feel the need to strike first? Such considerations are logical, lethal, and apparently disregarded by current civil defense planners.

Another authoritative assessment of the relocation

earlier "rival" in claiming this distinction. I refer to the Department of Defense's National Community Fallout Shelter Design Competition in 1965. Finding considerable potential for protection from nuclear war in the suburban shopping center, the DOD sponsored this competition to promote ingenuity "in the design of dual purpose fallout shelter space in shopping centers with both aesthetic and functional advantages" (*Winning Designs for Fallout Shelters in Shopping Centers*, Office of Civil Defense, October, 1965).

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option has been offered in *Nuclear Weapons*, a 1980 report of the secretary-general of the United Nations. According to this assessment (notably diplomatic in tone):

Evacuation of population from areas expected to come under attack has to be planned very carefully in advance. Apart from transportation and housing of evacuees, this planning must include at least short-term provisions for the relocated population. Information and instructions to the general public would have to be issued in advance. Even if instructions were available, however, the execution of an evacuation would probably be accompanied by confusion and panic. Large-scale evacuation is, therefore, in most cases, no attractive option.

To start an evacuation too early would mean an unnecessary disruption of everyday activities; to start too late would worsen the prospects for those evacuated as their vulnerability would be highest during the transfer phase....In addition, there is the particular problem of radioactive fallout, as available radiation shielding can generally be expected to be inferior in rural areas. Furthermore, the location of serious fallout areas cannot be predicted in advance.

REALITY AND FEAR

Clearly the promise of relocation is illusory. Before this situation can be reversed, our strategic planners will have to abandon their models of circular sophistry in favor of acceptable patterns of reasoning. Can they? One source of hope is that the need to avoid nuclear war, only a few years ago a marginal tic of consciousness, is now a swollen, irreversible imperative. *Sapere Aude!* "Dare to know!" This motto of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment has acquired a special meaning for those who, taking civilization seriously, attempt to confront the purveyors of strategic myth.

America has been thinking against itself. Survival requires a new consciousness. To avoid further contamination by the superstitions of those who urge expanding patterns of civil defense, America must resist confronting the Apocalypse as healer. Its sole ambition must be to remain aware of, and to prevent, the *incurable*. "A thermonuclear war cannot be considered a continuation of politics by other means," wrote Andrei Sakharov in *Progress, Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom*. "It would mean universal suicide."

In the words of the distinguished author Ernest Becker in *The Denial of Death*, "Reality and fear go together naturally." And just as repression of the fear of death by individual human beings can occasion activities that impair the forces of self-preservation, so too the United States can impair its prospects for survival by insulating itself from reasonable fears of gigadeath—death in the billions. While it is true that fear of death must be tempered in both individual and national drives lest it create paralysis, to deny the effect of such fear altogether is to make the threat of extinction more imminent still. By acting to reject the relocation option, the United States would be confronting the possibilities of civil defense not as victim but as gifted elegist. [▼▼▼]