



# Civil disaster

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**R**EADY OR NOT, YOU ARE in imminent danger of being drafted into a massive army of nuclear pawns. In March the Reagan administration sent officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the agency whose duty is to see us through disasters, natural and nuclear, before Congress to plead for a \$4.2 billion, seven-year drive to "provide for the survival of a substantial portion of the population in the event of nuclear attack." The centerpiece of this program is accelerated completion of Crisis Relocation Planning (CRP). A human shell game that rivals in complexity even the mobile MX basing plan, CRP provides for the strategic evacuation of some 150 million Americans from 400 high-risk target areas to 2000 or so supposedly low-risk "host areas."

A lopsided House of Representatives majority first voted 240 to 163 to honor the administration's \$252 million civil-defense package in July. Maybe those representatives voting "Aye" were influenced by the results of the first of a series of Gallup polls commissioned by FEMA and published earlier in the month. That survey found that 61 percent of the adults polled approved "strongly" or "somewhat" of CRP. Twenty-one percent disapproved, and 18 percent had no opinion. The series of polls was launched by FEMA as part of a campaign to counter its persistent public-relations problems. Its image as an asylum for atomic lunatics had been enhanced in past months by certain official comments to the effect that, if only we march into Armageddon with enough shovels, "everybody's going to make it."

While FEMA would like to claim a mandate on the basis of CRP's 61 per-

cent approval rating, asking folks if they would like to be shielded from 5000 megatons of nuclear energy is like asking if they would like a million dollars. Why . . . sure! But can it be done? A June 1981 independent Gallup survey reveals starkly how little faith Americans have in life after Domsday. Forty-seven percent of those polled felt that nuclear war was "fairly" or "very" likely within ten years. Of that same respondent pool, 92 percent rated their own likelihood of surviving such a war as 50/50 or worse. Significantly, this deep fatalism was expressed many months before publication of Jonathan Schell's *The Fate of the Earth*, Ground Zero Week, and the nuclear freeze march on New York City.

The Reagan proposal found rougher sledding in the Senate, which slashed his request back by almost \$150 million. After some horse-trading in the Senate-House conference committee, a total of \$152 million was agreed on. The new appropriation, most observers concurred, was a slight setback for the Reagan forces but was still a \$24 million increase over last year's FEMA budget—enough to keep the CRP program going.

Though it promises to ensure continuity of life, the chimera of civil defense (renamed "civil disaster" by the House) as resurrected by Reagan is a piece of nuclear high jinks on a par with the contingency plans for "protracted" nuclear wars and elaborate World War III scenarios to test "continuity of government." In one such test James Watt, of all people, ended up running the country. At bottom, crisis relocation is a logical codicil to a steadily emerging, post-deterrence nuclear doctrine. Its current popularity in the White House is one more step down a path that leads us closer to the final disaster than we have stumbled since the deep-freeze days of the Cold War.

In the early sixties, too, missile rattling was counterpointed by soothing reassurances on nuclear protection.

Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, in a 1961 manual, "Fallout Protection: What to Know and Do About Nuclear Attack," acknowledged the horrors of atomic war. "But," he hastened to add, "if effective precautions have been taken in advance, it need not be a time of despair." Reagan aide Edwin Meese, the most vocal White House advocate of the \$4.2 billion get-out-of-town plan, displayed a strikingly similar sang-froid when he described nuclear war in an early March address to the U.S. Civil Defense Council as "something that may not be desirable."

While other administrations may not have wrestled quite so publicly with their ambiguous feelings about nuclear war, neither did they shirk measures they thought necessary to fight and, hopefully, survive one. President Kennedy, while playing atomic chicken with Premier Khrushchev in Berlin and Cuba, tried to sell the nation on a \$3 billion bomb and fallout-shelter program. Even in those fearful days, Congress wasn't buying, though it did cough up \$294 million in 1962, still the largest fiscal endorsement ever awarded civil defense.

In the gradually warming international climate that followed, the push by the small but feisty civil-defense lobby went largely unheeded. Then, late in 1978, President Carter issued Presidential Directive 41, calling for civil-defense measures costing \$2 billion over seven years. Pinned down by a blistering fire of acrimonious congressional debate and derisive press, Carter retreated into "no comments" only to emerge two months later denying having ever seriously proposed the plan.

The civil-defense baton he so unceremoniously dropped was picked up by Representative Donald Mitchell (R-N.Y.), who was instrumental in winning CRP's recent House victory. In an interview just before Reagan's initiative was announced last March, Mitchell insisted there was a growing constituency for what he admitted most view as a "laughable subject." "We have a different president now, one who hangs in there," Mitchell exulted. "And we have a different attitude towards defense. If you envision civil defense as part of an overall defense program to destroy the enemy, then I think in that light it will be more acceptable."

This aggressive definition of civil defense, glossing as it does over the

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usual lifesaving rationale, is hardly inimical to the mentality that has made CRP such a favorite with nuclear thinkers over the last decade. Carter's PD-41 sought a civil-defense posture that would "enhance deterrence and stability in conjunction with our strategic offensive and other strategic defensive forces." Reagan's FEMA delegation parroted this objective word-for-word last March before Congress.

Bardyl Tirana, Carter's civil-defense chief, says that the gravitation toward CRP came about because it so neatly complements an ongoing retreat from the longstanding strategic principle of Mutual Assured Destruction, or MAD, by which the price of nuclear aggression is nuclear obliteration.

"The concept that you hold your populations hostage was under attack," he recalls. "That the United States uses its own population to prevent the Soviets from using military force around the world was, in the view of some people, a ludicrous position."

In fact, MADness, installed as national policy by McNamara as an elaboration on Eisenhower Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's "massive retaliation" policy, was never fully accepted by the Pentagon's back-office strategists. Slowly, the erosion of MAD as the acknowledged bedrock reality of the nuclear impasse picked up with Nixon Defense Secretary James Schlesinger's "limited nuclear options" policy and then accelerated rapidly under Carter Defense Secretary Harold Brown's "countervailing strategy."

Generally, strategic theory is only a handmaiden to the hardware—in effect, the caboose pulls the train. As targeting flexibility and missile accuracy have steadily improved, strategists have come to believe that one side could vaporize the other's retaliatory targets with a "bolt out of the blue" (BOOB) attack. In theory, at least, the aggressor thereby wrings surrender from its disarmed foe before hostilities escalate to wanton city-busting. This proposition has been facetiously labeled NUT, for "Nuclear Utilization Theory," because it implies a willingness to wield ICBMs as surgical scalpels in a "limited nuclear war" rather than relying on them solely as a sledgehammer response to—and so a deterrent against—a first strike.

The implications NUT holds for civil defense suggest themselves readily.

NUTniks argue that, while a population may have little defense against a massive attack, a limited strike against strategic targets alone would subject fewer Americans to the direct effects of nuclear blast and heat. Fallout, they concede, would still be a major, if more manageable, consideration.

In this vein, Reagan's civil-defense program dovetails nicely with the recent defense guidance issued by his secretary of defense. As Caspar Weinberger would like to have it, we should be able to wage a prolonged war in which American nuclear forces "must prevail and be able to force the Soviet Union to seek earliest termination of hostilities on terms favorable to the United States." Needless to say, if such a victory isn't to be grotesquely Pyrrhic, at least a few Americans will have to survive the unrelenting ICBM volley and countervolley. Enter crisis relocation. Exit Mutual Assured Destruction. Hello winnable nuclear war.

Carter's PD-59, which codified the United States' resolve to maintain a flexible posture for fighting a nuclear war—of which the Weinberger guidance is the logical extreme—was in fact the inseparable Siamese twin of his PD-41, which made crisis relocation an essential element of the strategic balance. In that tradition, it was altogether fitting and not at all surprising that Reagan advocated a \$4.2 billion crisis relocation plan the same week he warned darkly that the Soviets "have a definite margin of superiority" that would allow them to "absorb our retaliatory blow and hit us again."

Many strategists hold that MAD is an ugly fact of life that cannot be easily wished away. However plaintively the Defense Department frets about the vulnerability of America's 1052 land-based missiles, more than enough land- and sea-based warheads would survive any conceivable Soviet BOOB attack to make it a last act of suicidal desperation. Even a so-called surgical strike would, in practice, be as neat and clean as doing a tonsillectomy with a chainsaw. Nuclear weapons are too clumsy, too awesome to be used for much save maintaining a precarious standoff or committing mass mutual suicide. "If we use our 10,000 warheads and they use their 7000, nobody will be king," Paul Warnke, Carter's arms-control chief, observed last spring. "We could say, 'By God, we beat them, we're now ahead of the Soviet Union. Of course, we're slightly behind the Fiji Islands.'"

**B**UT STRATEGISTS SUCH AS Warnke who recognize and speak this basic truth find no receptive ear in an administration chock-full of such NUTs as Paul Nitze, Eugene Rostow, and Richard Perle.

Rarely does the civil-defense debate include the strategic bottom-line. Rather, FEMA officials juggle survival statistics in the grisly body-count arithmetic that defines nuclear victory. They promise us the immediate survival of 80 percent of the U.S. population if only their protective prescription is followed. Even if they could make good on this pledge, a vast exhaustive and exhausting literature on probable post-attack environments stands to call the eventual fate of that lucky 80 percent into doubt. According to the best available evidence, most of it drawn from an endless series of government studies, crisis relocation will do little if anything to ensure long-term survival. More likely, it will only guarantee prolonged agony for the veterans of World War III.

FEMA's evacuation scenarios are so pathetically inadequate that they resemble frightened whistling in the dark. When pressed to the wall, many civil-defense planners will offer, as has one New Jersey official, the weak argument that there is a "psychological benefit to doing something, whether you believe in the efficacy of civil defense or not. Government, after all, does have a moral requirement to try and protect its citizenry."

"Spending money on civil defense," argues a FEMA planner, "is like building a lifeboat. It doesn't mean you're going to sink the ship."

But the politicians and local anti-civil-defense activists who are saying, in ever greater numbers, "Thanks but no thanks" to FEMA are not moved by fear that planners are working deliberately to sink the ship of state. Their concern is that it not capsize accidentally under the oppressive weight of nuclear-war preparedness and delusions of nuclear survivability.

Ironically, Ronald Reagan, when pressed, has come out and stated flatly that he finds nuclear war neither desirable nor winnable. The urge to believe him is overwhelming. We really *have* to believe him. What hope for the future if our commander-in-chief believed either proposition?

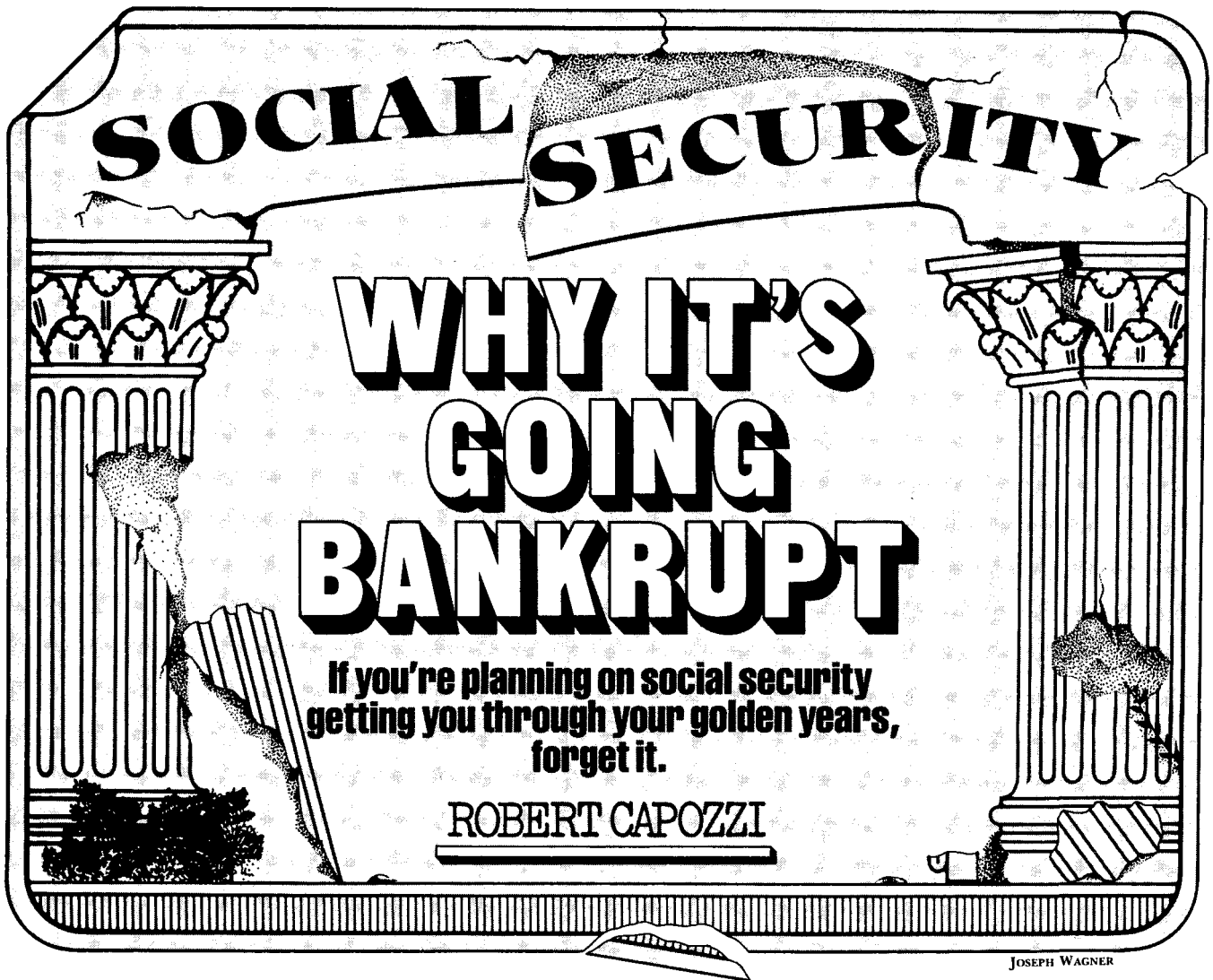
But what are we to think when his administration promotes bus trips to the country as a rational response to an ever-darkening nuclear dilemma? ■

A high-contrast, black and white photograph of a control panel. On the left side, there are seven vertical sliders or faders, each with a dark, rounded knob at the bottom. To the right of these sliders is a large, dark rectangular area, possibly a display or a control button. Below this rectangle are two sets of horizontal lines, resembling a speaker grille or a ventilation slot. In the center-right of the panel is a circular dial or knob with a textured surface. The entire image is framed by a thick black border.

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**T**HERE IS NO FEDERAL PROGRAM MORE sacred than social security. Politicians foolish enough to question it—Barry Goldwater in 1964, for example—are punished at the polls. Surviving politicians, such as Ronald Reagan (who in 1964 suggested making the system voluntary), have learned to ignore the system's fundamental flaws and its negative impact on the economy, and to pledge to "protect" and "improve" the system.

This self-imposed political blindness is the cause of one of the most serious dilemmas of the social security system: the refusal of the politicians and bureaucrats even to *consider* a modest, let alone a fundamental, overhauling of the system. With striking consistency, members of Congress, social security commissioners, and court economists have affirmed that this keystone of the welfare state is "fundamentally sound"—needing, at most, a little tax hike here and a benefit cut there. It is, after all, "one of the great triumphs of American social engineering," according to economist Lester Thurow, and "the nation's biggest, broadest, and probably most successful social program," in the opinion of *Time* magazine.

However, a few government officials are now willing to tell the truth. John A. Svahn, commissioner of social security, warned in a recent interview that "the stark truth is

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this: The projected bankruptcy of social security is imminent." According to the 1982 *Annual Report of the Social Security Board of Trustees*, unless some action is taken soon, "the main trust fund will be unable to make benefit payments on time beginning no later than July 1983." In short, social security may run out of money within a year.

The problems with the social security system are obvious yet complicated: obvious because the raw statistics are startlingly grave, and complicated because the system is at once unfathomable and very popular. Some of the simple statistics include:

- In 1940 there were some 300 contributors for every one beneficiary. That ratio is now 3:1. By the year 2000 it will be 2:1.
- When the system began in 1935, the average life expectancy was sixty-two. It is now about seventy-four.
- Annual social security expenditures have gone from roughly \$10 million in 1938 to \$175 billion in 1981.
- The combined employer/employee social security tax rate has increased exponentially from about 0.2 percent in 1940 to 13.4 percent in 1982, and will increase to 15.3 percent by 1990.
- The so-called trust funds have only two months' worth of benefits in reserve. These reserves, which must cover current operating deficits, will be exhausted in July 1983.

How has the nation's "most successful social program" come to the brink of bankruptcy? The prime reason is that this "great triumph of American social engineering" was