

“Shadow Government” in the Case of a “Second 9/11”: Back to the Bunker:

Federal government to conduct large scale anti-terror drill

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Global Research Editor's Note

William Arkin reports in the Washington Post on the largest anti-terror drill yet to be conducted in the context of the “Continuity in Government” procedures.

The drill is intended to prepare the country for “a Second 9/11”. If a second 9/11 were to occur, civilian government would in all likelihood be suspended and martial law would be established.

On Monday, June 19, about 4,000 government workers representing more than 50 federal agencies from the State Department to the Commodity Futures Trading Commission will say goodbye to their families and set off for dozens of classified emergency facilities stretching from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs to the foothills of the Alleghenies. They will take to the bunkers in an “evacuation” that my sources describe as the largest “continuity of government” exercise ever conducted, a drill intended to prepare the U.S. government for an event even more catastrophic than the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The exercise is the latest manifestation of an obsession with government survival that has been a hallmark of the Bush administration since 9/11, a focus of enormous and often absurd time, money and effort that has come to echo the worst follies of the Cold War. The vast secret operation has updated the duck-and-cover scenarios of the 1950s with state-of-the-art technology — alerts and updates delivered by pager and PDA, wireless priority service, video teleconferencing, remote backups — to ensure that “essential” government functions continue uninterrupted should a terrorist’s nuclear bomb go off in downtown Washington.

But for all the BlackBerry culture, the outcome is still old-fashioned black and white: We’ve spent hundreds of millions of dollars on alternate facilities, data warehouses and communications, yet no one can really foretell what would happen to the leadership and functioning of the federal government in a catastrophe.

After 9/11, The Washington Post reported that President Bush had set up a shadow government of about 100 senior civilian managers to live and work outside Washington on a rotating basis to ensure the continuity of national security. Since then, a program once focused on presidential succession and civilian control of U.S. nuclear weapons has been expanded to encompass the entire government. From the Department of Education to the

Small Business Administration to the National Archives, every department and agency is now required to plan for continuity outside Washington.

Yet according to scores of documents I've obtained and interviews with half a dozen sources, there's no greater confidence today that essential services would be maintained in a disaster. And no one really knows how an evacuation would even be physically possible.

Moreover, since 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the definition of what constitutes an "essential" government function has been expanded so ridiculously beyond core national security functions — do we really need patent and trademark processing in the middle of a nuclear holocaust? — that the term has become meaningless. The intent of the government effort may be laudable, even necessary, but a hyper-centralized approach based on the Cold War model of evacuations and bunkering makes it practically worthless.

That the continuity program is so poorly conceived, and poorly run, should come as no surprise. That's because the same Federal Emergency Management Agency that failed New Orleans after Katrina, an agency that a Senate investigating committee has pronounced "in shambles and beyond repair," is in charge of this enormous effort to plan for the U.S. government's survival.

Continuity programs began in the early 1950s, when the threat of nuclear war moved the administration of President Harry S. Truman to begin planning for emergency government functions and civil defense. Evacuation bunkers were built, and an incredibly complex and secretive shadow government program was created.

At its height, the grand era of continuity boasted the fully operational Mount Weather, a civilian bunker built along the crest of Virginia's Blue Ridge, to which most agency heads would evacuate; the Greenbrier hotel complex and bunker in West Virginia, where Congress would shelter; and Raven Rock, or Site R, a national security bunker bored into granite along the Pennsylvania-Maryland border near Camp David, where the Joint Chiefs of Staff would command a protracted nuclear war. Special communications networks were built, and evacuation and succession procedures were practiced continually.

When the Soviet Union crumbled, the program became a Cold War curiosity: Then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney ordered Raven Rock into caretaker status in 1991. The Greenbrier bunker was shuttered and a 30-year-old special access program was declassified three years later.

Then came the terrorist attacks of the mid-1990s and the looming Y2K rollover, and suddenly continuity wasn't only for nuclear war anymore. On Oct. 21, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed Presidential Decision Directive 67, "Enduring Constitutional Government and Continuity of Government Operations." No longer would only the very few elite leaders responsible for national security be covered. Instead, every single government department and agency was directed to see to it that they could resume critical functions within 12 hours of a warning, and keep their operations running at emergency facilities for up to 30 days. FEMA was put in charge of this broad new program.

On 9/11, the program was put to the test — and failed. Not on the national security side: Vice President Cheney and others in the national security leadership were smoothly whisked away from the capital following procedures overseen by the Pentagon and the White House Military Office. But like the mass of Washingtonians, officials from other agencies found

themselves virtually on their own, unsure of where to go or what to do, or whom to contact for the answers.

In the aftermath, the federal government was told to reinvigorate its continuity efforts. Bush approved lines of succession for civil agencies. Cabinet departments and agencies were assigned specific emergency responsibilities. FEMA issued new preparedness guidelines and oversaw training. A National Capital Region continuity working group established in 1999, comprising six White House groups, 15 departments and 61 agencies, met to coordinate.

But all the frenetic activity did not produce a government prepared for the worst. A year after 9/11, and almost three years after the deadline set in Clinton's 1998 directive, the Government Accounting Office evaluated 38 agencies and found that not one had addressed all the issues it had been ordered to. A 2004 GAO audit of 34 government continuity-of-operations plans found total confusion on the question of essential functions. One unnamed organization listed 399 such functions. A department included providing "speeches and articles for the Secretary and Deputy Secretary" among its essential duties, while neglecting many of its central programs.

The confusion and absurdity have continued, according to documents I've collected over the past few years. In June 2004, FEMA told federal agencies that essential services in a catastrophe would include not only such obvious ones as electric power generation and disaster relief but also patent and trademark processing, student aid and passport processing. A month earlier, FEMA had told states and local communities that library services should be counted as essential along with fire protection and law enforcement.

None of this can be heartening to Americans who want to believe that in a crisis, their government can distinguish between what is truly essential and what isn't — and provide it.

Just two years ago, an exercise called Forward Challenge '04 pointed up the danger of making everyone and everything essential: Barely an hour after agencies were due to arrive at their relocation sites, the Office of Management and Budget asked the reconstituted government to identify emergency funding requirements.

As one after-action report for the exercise later put it in a classic case of understatement: "It was not clear . . . whether this would be a realistic request at that stage of an emergency."

This year's exercise, Forward Challenge '06, will be the third major interagency continuity exercise since 9/11. Larger than Forward Challenge '04 and the Pinnacle exercise held last year, it requires 31 departments and agencies (including FEMA) to relocate. Fifty to 60 are expected to take part.

According to government sources, the exercise will test the newly created continuity of government alert conditions — called COGCONs — that emulate the DEFCONs of the national security community. Forward Challenge will begin with a series of alerts via BlackBerry and pager to key officials. It will test COGCON 1, the highest level of preparedness, in which each department and agency is required to have at least one person in its chain of command and sufficient staffing at alternate operating facilities to perform essential functions.

Though key White House officials and military leadership would be relocated via the Pentagon's Joint Emergency Evacuation Program (JEEP), the civilians are on their own to

make it to their designated evacuation points.

But fear not: Each organization's COOP, or continuity of operations plan, details the best routes to the emergency locations. The plans even spell out what evacuees should take with them (recommended items: a combination lock, a flashlight, two towels and a small box of washing powder).

Can such an exercise, announced well in advance, hope to re-create any of the tensions and fears of a real crisis? How do you simulate the experience of driving through blazing, radiated, panic-stricken streets to emergency bunker sites miles away?

As the Energy Department stated in its review of Forward Challenge '04, "a method needs to be devised to realistically test the ability of . . . federal offices to relocate to their COOP sites using a scenario that simulates . . . the monumental challenges that would be involved in evacuating the city."

With its new plans and procedures, Washington may think it has thought of everything to save itself. Forward Challenge will no doubt be deemed a success, and officials will pronounce the continuity-of-government project sound. There will be lessons to be learned that will justify more millions of dollars and more work in the infinite effort to guarantee order out of chaos.

But the main defect — a bunker mentality that considers too many people and too many jobs "essential" — will remain unchallenged.

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