The Challenges and Opportunities of Civil Defense Messaging Today

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US Civil Defense efforts can be *roughly* categorized by decade:

- **1950s**: “Duck and Cover”: urban shelter from bombers
- **1960s**: “Fallout shelter”: suburban fallout mitigation
- **1970s**: “What’s the point?”: decline in political support
- **1980s**: “All-hazards”: de-emphasizing nukes in emergency planning
- **1990s**: “Thank God that’s over with”: Civil Defense as Cold War relic/object of fun
- **2000s**: “Axis of Evil”: mitigating nuclear terrorism/rogue state threats
Multiple plausible categories for a nuclear detonation on US soil

- Nuclear terrorism; pariah state (North Korea); even nuclear-armed major states (Russia, China)

Strong research program by US government into CD planning

- Good indications that what civilians do after a detonation will have a very large impact on the number of preventable casualties
- Studies assume a high degree of civilian compliance with messaging after detonation

Some messaging about nuclear risk hazards before detonation exists

- Most focused on individual detonations
- Our research suggests that almost none of this has penetrated into target populations
- Informal indications from practitioners that this is a political “hot potato” and so they are required to tread very carefully regarding public discussion
- Civil Defense as an idea highly politicized, viewed as discredited by most people

= The US does not really have anything like a coherent Civil Defense program, and its population is not at all prepared for a nuclear detonation
Civil Defense has a horrible reputation amongst Americans

- Most view it as discredited, propaganda, and disingenuous
- Complicated by a post-Vietnam, post-Watergate skepticism in government

Cold War-era Civil Defense messaging has a very mixed legacy

- Faced resistance even in its time, became a subject of unending mockery
- US government has an apparent inability to tell people that many of them are likely to die no matter what = reduces credibility
- Most Cold War messaging had almost no research into its effectiveness before it was deployed, only sporadic research into its effectiveness after it was deployed

Most Americans don’t worry about nuclear detonations… until they suddenly do (crisis moments)

- Common response: “What can we do? We can’t do anything!”
- In an actual nuclear detonation, unclear what the response would be — but would probably be far from ideal situation
- Very hard to get Americans, esp. young Americans, to take this seriously when outside of a crisis
Crisis moments do provoke interest in the subject, and that interest can translate into longer-term engagement

- So fortunately or not, we’ve had a lot of crises, and will probably have more, and so the awareness/salience of this issue has increased, and the opportunities for communication have increased

Because they aren’t thinking about them that much, younger Americans don’t have strong opinions about nuclear weapons

- Which means that you have to work less hard to overcome misconceptions or myths than you would otherwise — the “first” opinion is usually the strongest

- Many possibilities for effective “messengers” other than the US government, pamphlets, etc.

- Difficulty, of course, is that while the bandwidth has increased exponentially, so has the competition for attention

Personalizing the threat of nuclear weapons may also increase American’s involvement/investment in nuclear issues in general
WHAT MIGHT BE DONE?

• Our research suggests that there may be ways to leverage new media engagement to community these issues to the “next generation” of Americans (e.g. Millennials and younger)

• Civil Defense techniques of embodying threat response (“Duck and Cover”) and infrastructure identification (fallout shelters) have been used successfully to communicate about other kinds of threats, and may be more important than just “messaging”

• As the number of nuclear crises in the 2010s-2020s likely increases, there may be more opportunities to find ways to reintroduce ideas from Civil Defense that will not be instantly rejected

• To do this may require the government/military to engage with partners in academia, think tanks, and so on, rather than do this themselves

• These efforts should be supported by robust research both before and after crises, so that their effectiveness or lack thereof can be more readily understood
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