

EDITORIAL

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Cry "Wolf!"

For more than thirty years state and local offices of Civil Defense, set up following the end of World War II which ended abruptly when America exploded two atomic bombs in Japanese cities, have developed and refined plans to be put into immediate action in the event of a military attack on the United States.

Early in January, 1984, forty-four of Pennsylvania's sixty-seven counties received warning that the state was under siege. In the Allentown area, forty sirens wailed warnings to the civilian population: "Take cover. Seek protection in a shelter immediately."

Fortunately for Pennsylvania, the warning was released in error when technicians at the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency tried to duplicate a stored message and put it into the agency's new computer system. Had attack been imminent, had the warning been vital to the safety of the people of Allentown, disaster would have been multiplied by calamity, for the warnings were ignored by virtually everyone except police and fire departments and emergency officials. The civilian population, which the sirens are supposed to warn, paid no more attention to the wailings than had they gone unheard.

That people ignored the signals may mean a widespread lack of concern about possible danger should the United States ever come under attack by enemy forces. Concern for individual personal safety would be widespread, of course, if an attack were actually under way; if bombs were falling and exploding and a fire storm were sweeping the area, people would seek whatever shelter they could. If the general populace waits until it is clear that an actual attack is taking place, however, many (who might survive if they took precautions at first warning) will not make it to any shelter at all. Time lapse between an atomic explosion and disaster effects, ten miles distant, is measurable in seconds.

When civil defense was first developed, people took seriously both the need for protection and posted warning signals of police and fire departments. Some people even went so far as to construct and stock their own private bomb shelters. Surviving an atomic attack was viewed as possible only if precautions were taken to protect people from blast, fire, and fallout. Concern was real; anxiety was widespread.

Facts have not changed nor dangers diminished.

Thirty years later, though, when a warning is inadvertently released and forty sirens scream, people go about their business as if they were totally impervious to harm. That the alarm was a false one is, indeed, fortunate.

Have we cried "Wolf!" too often? Or is it simply not possible for people to remain responsive after living thirty years or more, in many cases all their lives, under threat of nuclear war? Does the mass human psyche adjust itself to accept the dreadful possibility? Do people become philosophical, tolerant, or resigned to the inevitability of their own destruction? Have we become fatalistic? To preserve sanity, do we adopt an attitude that what happens is predestined, and we need not, therefore, try to save ourselves?

Whatever the psychological mechanism operational among the people of Allentown, a similar mechanism is very likely to exist among most of the nation's population. Whether in Podunk or Peoria, Americans . . . for all their "melting pot" heritage . . . are very likely to respond in about the same way.

We may all be in greater danger than need be because we decline to take seriously the threat with which we live. It will take, of course, but one attack on any city or town in the United States to galvanize every other into instant action. Should an attack ever come, let us hope it does not arrive simultaneously in population centers, nationwide.