

IS RONALD REAGAN ABANDONING CIVIL DEFENSE ?

In this year's State of the Union message, Ronald Reagan made a strong plea for his Strategic Defense Initiative, noting pointedly that the Soviets "...already have strategic defenses that surpass ours [and] a civil defense system, where we have almost none...." Just days before, however, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) submitted a proposed budget that would guarantee that the U.S. remain without much civil defense. The apparent decision to abandon civil defense, whatever its motivation, contradicts the President's stated commitment to civil and strategic defenses, explicit legislative preference, American public opinion, and plain common sense.

OMB has proposed that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) have a civil defense budget of \$119 million, roughly a 40 percent cut from its current level of \$181 million, and 60 percent below FEMA's original \$285 million request. One of the central facets of the civil defense effort was the crisis relocation program designed to evacuate Americans from high risk areas during times of crisis. The FEMA budget cut apparently spells the effective end of this program. Programs to improve emergency operation centers (used for controlling natural and war-related disasters), to survey buildings for use as fallout shelters, to stock and mark those shelters, to protect vital industries, and to research remaining civil defense problems all have been slashed or halted. The result: FEMA's past efforts to protect the American public from nuclear attack will come to naught. It marks the end of the Reagan modernization and expansion of U.S. civil defense efforts.

The irony is that the Reagan Administration, far more than its predecessors, has recognized the value of defense--in contrast to purely offensively based deterrence--on military and moral grounds. This is reflected most dramatically in Reagan's firm commitment to the Strategic Defense Initiative, designed to identify the technologies to destroy ballistic missiles and their warheads before they strike the U.S. It is also reflected in Reagan's proposed 1982 civil defense program. This was a seven-year, \$4.2 billion effort intended to double the number of

Americans who would survive a nuclear attack, even without the active defenses being investigated in SDI.

SDI and civil defense are complementary. No active defense is likely to be absolutely leakproof. The warheads that penetrate the defense could cause heavy casualties unless Americans are protected by civil defense. As a necessary and relatively inexpensive adjunct to active defenses, civil defense clearly cannot be cut.

The Soviets, on the other hand, wisely see civil defense as an element in the strategic balance. They expand and improve their own civil defense system, spending ten to fifteen times more than does the U.S. Some estimates suggest that up to 90 percent of the Soviet population would survive a massive nuclear attack, compared to less than 40 percent of the U.S. population. Such estimates can have enormous impact on Soviet leaders deciding, in a crisis, how much pressure to mount on Washington. Civil defense disparities, therefore, destabilize the superpower relationship.

Congress has given Reagan real annual increases of about 6 percent per year in civil defense since 1982. Last May, the House of Representatives, by a 301 to 87 vote, rejected a proposal to eliminate civil defense spending specifically designated for defense against nuclear attack. Public opinion polls, meanwhile, show consistently strong grassroots support for federal civil defense efforts.

Civil defense is not the "favorite son" of any special interest group. It benefits everyone, but has no strong or loud constituency demanding it above all else. Yet it is common sense to take steps to help Americans survive in the event of war; indeed, it is the most fundamental legal and moral responsibility of government. The Administration thus should not abandon civil defense.

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For further reading:

Brian Green, "The New Case for Civil Defense," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder, No. 377, August 29, 1984.

Francis P. Hoerber, "Civil Emergency Preparedness If Deterrence Fails," Comparative Strategy, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1979.