

'Logic of madness': nuclear survivability

Yes indeed, ladies and gentlemen, just when the script was getting stale, we are offered a new act in the National Nuclear Follies. A hearty welcome, please, for "FEMA and The Farmers."



Ellen Goodman

When last heard from, you may recall, the Federal Emergency Management Agency was hoofing it up on center stage with plans for evacuating our cities. In case of nuclear war, their theme song was: Pack up your troubles in your old family buggy and drive, drive, drive. Each urban dweller was assigned a rural destination and a welcome wagon.

Well, fans, FEMA is back. They've taken on the farmers and they're talking food. They have assessed the post-nuke food situation and are here to tell us that the survivors are all gonna make it if there are enough cans to go around.

FEMA produced its new script as a briefing paper for the Cabinet last year. It was going to be a private showing, but Rep. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, put it into our national repertoire. Once again, the theme is upbeat: A large-scale nuclear war wouldn't devastate American agriculture.

In part, the planners are counting on the availability of migrant labor. There would be plenty of urban migrants hanging around to help with the harvest, they say. No more help problems, no more illegals. Everyone will pitch in with the picking.

They are also counting on diminished appetites. The pressure to feed the survivors will disappear pretty quickly, along with the survivors. Fol-

lowing an attack which would eliminate half the population, FEMA notes, "those who are doomed to die will be consumers for (only) part of that time." No problem.

Now I don't know about the rest of the civil defense audience out there, but I have a feeling that these people could have cribbed their script from "The Day After." The best scene in the film was the wonderful meeting between the bureaucrat and the farmers.

The bureaucrat, speaking from instructions probably produced by FEMA fantasists, tells the farmers to go out into the fields and scrape up the fallout and the contaminated top soils. This is a little like skimming a ten-mile oil slick off the ocean with a teaspoon. Only this time, we're talking dead dirt.

Frankly, I hate to pan such a sincere troupe. Lord knows, they win points for imagination. More to the point, FEMA and the farmers were just doing their job of post-nuke planning. In an era when we name a nuclear missile "The Peacekeeper" and talk freely about first-strike scenarios, FEMA is just a doo-wop chorus for a headliner like Edward Teller.

But I keep remembering the words of Robert Jay Lifton, the Yale professor of psychiatry who has written about the "logic of madness" in our nuclear thinking: "Civil defense is part of the fundamental illusions about a nuclear war: The illusion of surviving. The illu-

sion of recovery. It's massive denial."

Lifton's point of view is that of a nuclear theater critic. "In itself (civil defense) seems like a natural and appropriate thing to do. But it increases the possibility of nuclear war by making it more acceptable. That's why it's immoral."

In fairness, the FEMA predictions may be accurate. If Carl Sagan's group of scientists is right, 10 percent of the nuclear arsenal can create an ultimate Nuclear Winter. In that case, there would indeed be plenty of food for the number of people: none.

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Policy . . .

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In countering gestures to this big boost for the El Salvadoran government, the Administration has denied an entrance visa to Roberto d'Aubuisson, the leader of the rightist ARENA political party and source of right wing death squad activity; has announced efforts to crack down on secret funding of the paramilitary death squads by the El Salvadoran exile community in Miami; and has had ambassador to El Salvador Thomas Pickering deliver a stern lecture on the government-sanctioned killing.

None of these gestures could have much effect in reducing the terrible campaign of killing in El Salvador — murder which has reached to El Salvador's archbishop Romero and the families of rebel soldiers, American nuns and centerist politicians.

According to human rights groups affiliated with the Catholic archdiocese, more than 37,000 civilians have been murdered by d'Aubuisson's death squads and the El Salvadoran National Guard during the last four years.

And sermons are not going to stop the killing; the best and the only thing the U.S. can do is to cut off military and economic aid to El Salvador's corrupt and weak government. Ronald Reagan already has rejected that alternative.

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