

CIVIL DEFENCE

why we need it





Message from the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Scotland

For over 30 years our country, with our allies, has sought to avoid war by deterring potential aggressors. Some disagree as to the means we should use. But whatever view we take, we should surely all recognise the need – and indeed the duty – to protect our civil population if an attack were to be made upon us; and therefore to prepare accordingly.

The Government is determined that United Kingdom civil defence shall go ahead. The function of civil defence is not to encourage war, or to put an acceptable face on it. It is to adapt ourselves to the reality that we at present must live with, and to prepare ourselves so that we could alleviate the suffering which war would cause if it came.

Even the strongest supporter of unilateral disarmament can consistently give equal support to civil defence, since its purpose and effect are essentially humane.

George Younger as George Younger.

Why bother with civil defence?

Why bother with wearing a seat belt in a car? Because a seat belt is reckoned to lessen the chance of serious injury in a crash. The same applies to civil defence in peacetime.

War would be horrific. Everyone knows the kind of devastation and suffering it could cause. But while war is a possibility – however slight – it is right to take measures to help the victims of an attack, whether nuclear or ‘conventional’.

But isn't it a waste of money in these days of nuclear weapons and the dreadful prospects of destruction?

No. It is money well spent if it shows people how they can safeguard themselves and their families.

But surely there is no real protection against a nuclear attack?

Millions of lives could be saved, by safeguards against radiation especially. But civil defence is not just protection against a nuclear attack. It is protection against *any* sort of attack. NATO experts reckon that any war involving the UK is likely at least to start with non-nuclear weapons. Indeed, while no war is likely so long as we maintain a credible deterrent, the likelihood of a nuclear war is less than that of a ‘conventional’ one.

But doesn't civil defence get people more war-minded, thus increasing the risk of conflict?

That is like saying people who wear seat belts are expecting to have more crashes than those who do not. Taking civil defence seriously means seeking to save lives in the catastrophe of an attack on our country.

How would people know what to do if war threatened?

Full advice to the public about the warning system, and about measures to protect themselves, would be published and broadcast in good time. A wartime broadcast service would be brought into operation to transmit public information virtually non-stop. The advice would be – ‘Tune in and listen’.

Newspapers, television and radio would carry detailed advice on how to protect yourself and your family within your own home.

But shouldn't the Government be doing more to provide shelters? After all, every family was given a shelter of some sort in the last war.

The risk of war is at present considered so slight that the enormous expense of providing shelters to every family in the land could not be justified. It would cost billions of pounds. As it is, more is being spent on civil defence than previously – about £45 million a year by 1983/84. This is an ‘insurance premium’ against the remote risk that NATO’s continuing deterrent policy might fail. For more than 30 years it has kept war away from Europe.

More information about self-help shelters will be published from time to time, and local authorities are now being asked to survey their areas for suitable communal wartime shelters.

But what about those deep bunkers we hear about, to protect the privileged few?

Most senior ministers, government officials, and service chiefs would have to remain at their desks if war threatened, and they would take their chance like anybody else if the UK were attacked. But there are plans for government to be delegated to civil defence regions. Some ministers would, with small staffs, occupy emergency headquarters to be ready to carry on basic government after an attack. These war headquarters, although reinforced, are certainly not invulnerable. Most civil defence operations in a war emergency would be directed by local officials, working in the basements of town halls and similar premises.

Why not revive the old Civil Defence Corps?

Because this, too, would cost an unjustifiable amount of money. Every county and region has an Emergency Planning Officer whose job it is to prepare local civil defence plans and to co-ordinate local effort. The right sort of help can also be enlisted in other ways, for example through existing organisations like the Red Cross, the St John's and the St Andrew's Ambulance Brigades, the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and the Special Constabulary – help which is at hand in peace to the benefit of us all. All these public-spirited groups of volunteers, as well as the local volunteer Scientific Advisers and the United Kingdom Warning and Monitoring Organisation which includes the Royal Observer Corps, already back up the professional emergency services. To encourage more voluntary effort in civil defence, a national co-ordinator has been appointed for England and Wales, and another for Scotland. If you would like to help, ask your local volunteer organisations in your neighbourhood; the Citizens Advice Bureau or your local authority will have a list.

To Sum Up

The case for civil defence stands regardless of whether a nuclear deterrent is necessary or not. Radioactive fallout is no respecter of neutrality. Even if the UK were not itself at war, we would be as powerless to prevent fallout from a nuclear explosion crossing the sea as was King Canute to stop the tide. This is why countries with a long tradition of neutrality (such as Switzerland and Sweden) are foremost in their civil defence precautions.

Civil defence is common sense

Further information:

Nuclear Weapons

ISBN 0 11 34055 X

HMSO £3.50 (net)

Protect and Survive

ISBN 0 11 3407289

HMSO 50p (net)

Domestic Nuclear Shelters

ISBN 0 11 3407378

HMSO 50p (net)

*Domestic Nuclear Shelters –
Technical Guidance*

ISBN 0 11 34073786

HMSO £5.50 (net)



