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Better Nothing Than Something?

One argument that has been directed against present civil defense efforts is that the program, by giving us a false sense of security, will increase the likelihood of atomic war. Admittedly, the various statements and actions by various people in the government are at such odds that we are forced to wonder just what our civil defense program really is. But if we understand the basic objectives of the program to be those set forth by President Kennedy in his special message last May—a fair assumption—then this particular argument against civil defense is not convincing.

In the message, the President draws a distinction between deterrence and insurance. Our deterrent policy depends on a potential enemy responding rationally to the fact that, if his attack means our utter devastation, it also means his utter devastation at the hands of our retaliatory forces. But suppose another country acts irrationally, miscalculates, or launches an attack by accident? The civil defense program is conceived as insurance against this contingency. A shelter program, for example, could protect a part of the population against fallout, should the attack be of the kind that produces this hazard.

The argument that the present civil defense program will increase the likelihood of war seems to hinge on the supposition that the scope of the program will be misunderstood in a special way. The misunderstanding will be to attribute greater security to the program than it provides. This false sense of security will then lead us to indulge in a greater degree of brinkmanship than we would otherwise risk. With all the comfortable hustle and bustle that goes with carrying out civil defense, people will forget that the protection offered is only for a limited portion of the population, for the barest sort of survival, and against only certain kinds of attack.

There is plenty of evidence that the implications of the civil defense program have not been fully understood by the man in the street or, for that matter, by the New Frontiersmen responsible for getting the program going. In support of the latter contention, consider the delay in producing the famous booklet that was promised to explain everything. The delay can only mean that the policies for carrying out the basic objectives have not been worked out. The problem of preparing the booklet cannot simply be one of translating government jargon into English.

But because we are not doing well in the program, it does not follow that we cannot do better. Is the distinction between insurance and deterrence really so hard to grasp? It would seem to be comprehensible to any reader of one of the popular news weeklies. The basic ideas are not so foreign to us. When we take out accident insurance we do not regard our policy as a deterrent to motorists who might otherwise run us down. Why, then, if we are told that atomic war could mean the destruction of our civilization, should we forget that fact as soon as we are also told that a modest number of people who might otherwise perish could possibly be saved if we take proper precautions now?

It may be that civil defense will give us a false sense of security, but an equally good hunch is that once the program is fully under way its psychological impact will be somewhat different. It may make many people look squarely for the first time at the consequences of atomic war.

—J.T.