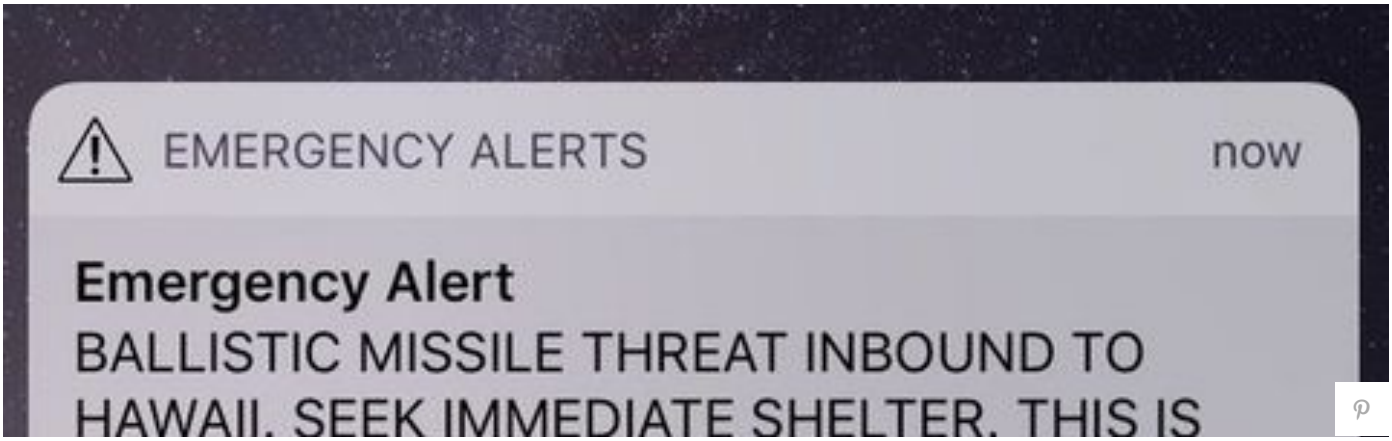
BETH HOECKEL

Minutes to Live: When the Nuclear Push Alert Is Not a Mistake

January 13, 2018 was (thankfully) a false alarm of the apocalypse for Hawaiians. But if the push notification comes that a North Korean missile is about to drop, just what the hell is the government's plan to keep you safe? (You might not want to know...)

BY GARRETT M. GRAFF JAN 14, 2018

Clarence Nishihara remembers the nuclear explosions that illuminated his childhood. Growing up in Hawaii in the 1950s and 1960s, he could see the green flash from thermonuclear tests over the Pacific Ocean. Nighttime blasts were particularly vivid. "For an instant, the whole landscape was bright as day," Nishihara recalls. A number of hotels even capitalized on the spectacle, arranging rooftop "rainbow bomb parties" where guests could watch the pyrotechnics while sipping sweet cocktails.



An push alert sent to Hawaiian citizens on Saturday, January 13, 2018. Officials reportedly said later it was mistakenly sent due to a human error.

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For many years, Nishihara's memories of the cold war felt like a chapter of ancient history, another artifact to set alongside sock hops and *I Love Lucy*. But now that he's a state senator on his native island of Oahu, Nishihara's past seems terrifyingly relevant again. As the "U. S. Dotard" Donald Trump has traded insults with "Rocket Man" Kim Jong Un, promising that American "fire and fury" would check the Hermit Kingdom's rapid advances in missile technology, Nishihara has used a series of town-hall meetings to help his state's citizens prepare for a nuclear attack.

Nishihara insists that such a possibility remains remote, but that hasn't stopped his state from trying to ready itself. In recent months, Hawaii's state emergency-management agency has added a "Nuclear Threat" tab on its website. The agency has also briefed state legislators and arranged public presentations for concerned citizens. On December 1, wailing air-raid sirens swept across the state's sand beaches as the Attack Warning Tone was tested for the first time in a quarter century.

"The current threat is causing us to revisit our authorities and capabilities."

Hawaii isn't the only place making preparations. Across the country, emergency-management officials have been quietly dusting off plans drawn up during the cold war and in the aftermath of September 11 to be ready for what they euphemistically label a "catastrophic nation-state threat," e.g., a North Korean nuclear missile. "The current threat and instability we're seeing across the globe—not just on the peninsula—is causing us to revisit our authorities and capabilities," says Mike Lapinski of the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which would help lead the government's response to a nuclear disaster. "We realized as an agency that we need to pay closer attention and work with our partners to ensure everyone understands what their roles would be."

There's something surreal about listening to public officials like Lapinski, Nishihara, and Vern Miyagi, the retired general who runs Hawaii's emergency-management agency, talk casually about kilotons, airbursts, blast radius, and radioactivity, as though an incoming ballistic missile were just another item on the city-council agenda. "If you'd asked me six months ago, I would have never thought we would be working on this threat," Miyagi told me recently. But the truth is that the period of relative nuclear calm we witnessed at the dawn of the twenty-first century was more the exception than the rule during the seven decades since J. Robert Oppenheimer's secret project proved itself in a brilliant flash in the New Mexico desert.

In fact, nuclear exercises were once commonplace in the United States. At the height of the cold war, New York City issued dog tags to its schoolchildren and Chicago recommended that its citizens tattoo their blood type on their torsos. (Never on a limb, though; an arm or leg could too easily be severed in a blast.) Major cities ran annual nuclear drills, known as Operation Alert exercises, and some places went even further. In 1955, Portland, Oregon, practiced Operation Green Light, a full-scale evacuation of the city. The exercise closed a thousand blocks and evacuated one hundred thousand people to twelve Red Cross "reception areas" outside the city.

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All of that planning atrophied over the course of the cold war, and in the quarter century since the end of the Soviet Union, much of it has been forgotten. In part, the apathy came from the government's realization of just how awful large-scale nuclear attacks would be—and how impossible it was to even imagine the logistics needed for a response. (Dwight Eisenhower observed in 1957, "You just can't have this kind of war. There aren't enough bulldozers to scrape the bodies off the streets.") Recent disasters, including Hurricanes Katrina, Harvey, and Maria, have only underscored the challenge of a

large-scale disaster response. But the country's first responders may be better prepared for a nuclear attack than we might expect.

Professional emergency-response managers rely on what they call an "all-hazards" approach, a buzzword that means drawing up flexible contingency plans that can be adapted to the particulars of a given disaster. Barb Graff (no relation), the head of emergency management in Seattle, told me that the city faces at least eighteen different hazards, from tsunamis to pandemics to "international hazards" like terrorism. "We can't comprehensively address all of them," she says, so her plans focus on the biggest threat to the Pacific Northwest: a mega-thrust earthquake along the Cascadia Subduction Zone. Plan for the worst, the theory goes, and then you can adapt that response to lesser catastrophes as needed. As Graff says, "If you're ready for an earthquake, you're ready for a lot of different things."

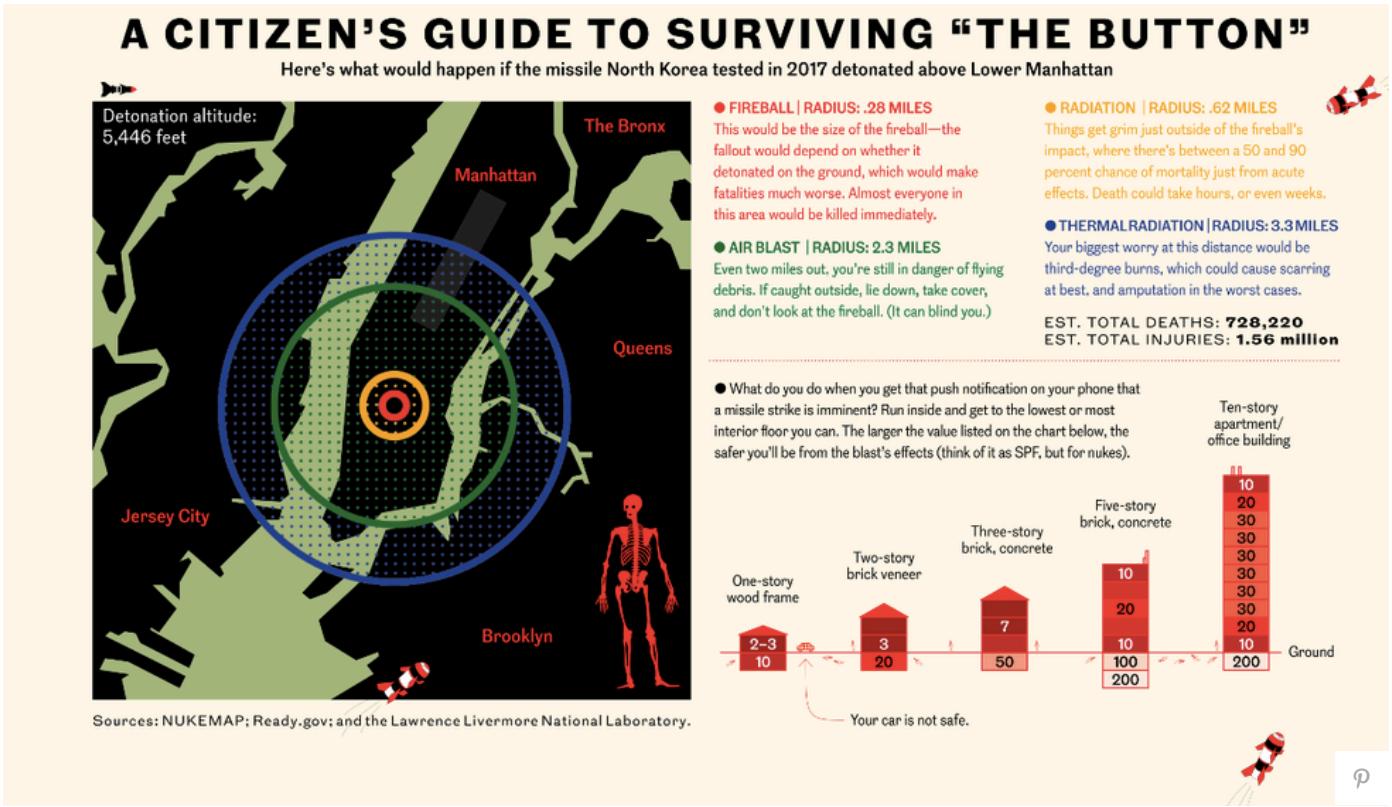
Moving so many people on such short notice would be logistically impossible, and would risk stranding them in situations far more dangerous than the ones they were fleeing.

Nationally, Ventura County, California, just to the north of Los Angeles, leads the country in nuclear preparedness. A decade ago, the county mapped out a 243-page plan for responding to a nuclear attack. It even aired a chilling two-minute public-service announcement that showed a young girl asking her parents how to stay safe. Dr. Robert Levin, the county public-health officer, started the effort in response to the general threat of terrorism, long before North Korea posed any real danger. Levin has approached the issue as a public-health problem. As with Zika or Ebola, he argues, the threat of a nuclear attack makes most people eager for information that will help them protect themselves and their families. His plan lays out roles for everyone from first responders (Step no. 1: Avoid radiation and quell civil disorder) to the weather service (determine wind direction and send to "plume mappers") to gas-station owners (Step no. 1: "Set pumps to ration gas supplies as planned or as directed by County EOC"). Many states and cities have drawn on Ventura County's resources in recent months.

The flood of Homeland Security dollars that followed 9/11 provided many cities with at least a modicum of readiness. Every piece of firefighting apparatus in New York now carries radiological sensors, and in Los Angeles, the county sheriff's special-operations team has truck-mounted radiation detectors, too. Key officials throughout government as well as in critical major organizations like utilities have emergency cards telling them how to dial into special landline networks and emergency wireless systems that are designed to work even if public networks are jammed.

In the event of an attack by North Korea, it would fall to the U. S. military to detect an incoming missile—or missiles—and pass that information to FEMA, the disaster-response agency established during the cold war as the modern incarnation of President Truman's Federal Civil Defense Administration. America's nascent missile-defense batteries in Alaska and California would scramble to attempt an intercept—spoiler: don't count on it working—and FEMA would rush to alert local and state authorities. If the missile appeared to be headed toward Hawaii, for instance, military officials would call the state command post buried inside the rim of Diamond Head Crater, outside Waikiki. If the missile were headed toward New York City, the alert would go to the city's emergency-operations center, just across the Brooklyn Bridge, and to the state's *24*-style command center under Albany, originally built by Nelson Rockefeller.

Meanwhile a series of carefully calibrated plans would ensure that the nation's leaders were evacuated by special helicopters. Some would be rushed to mountain bunkers, like the Pentagon's city-sized Raven Rock in Pennsylvania, or FEMA's Mount Weather facility in Berryville, Virginia. Others would take to the sky aboard airborne command posts, like the presidential doomsday plane, code-named *Nightwatch,* that's based at Offutt Air Force Base outside Omaha.



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For the rest of us, left outside nuclear-hardened bunkers, the advice suggested by the nation's top emergency-management minds is simple: "Go inside, stay inside, stay tuned." It's the modern equivalent of "Duck and cover," the advice offered by civil-defense mascot Bert the Turtle.

In the minutes before a strike, the public would be left almost entirely to fend for itself. Warnings would go out over a FEMA system known as IPAWS, the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System, and the shrill buzzes of the Wireless Emergency Alert system would take over radio and TV airwaves, and other networks, such as NOAA's weather radio, would have their own warnings.

But the warnings would likely allow precious little time. "It would take Pacific Command about five minutes to characterize the launch, determine its direction, and communicate that to us," Miyagi says about an attack on Hawaii. "That means we'd be giving the public about twelve to thirteen minutes of warning." A strike against the continental United States would offer perhaps fifteen to twenty minutes' advance notice—just enough time, planners say, for people to get inside their homes or to run down the street to a sturdier building.

A longer warning—hours or even days—wouldn't necessarily lead officials to order a mass evacuation. Moving millions or even thousands of people on such short notice would be logistically impossible, and would risk stranding them in situations far more dangerous than the ones they were fleeing. Similar reasoning guided the city of Houston's refusal to evacuate residents in advance of Hurricane Harvey—plus, today's cars are built with too much plastic to offer much protection against radiation. What's more, according to Seattle's Graff, the U. S. military has little faith in the accuracy of North Korea's missile-guidance systems, which means it would be difficult to know where to send everyone. "If we evacuate people south toward Tacoma and the state capital," she says, "and then the missile misses Seattle to the south by twenty miles, what good have we done?"

When we hear the words "nuclear attack," we still tend to think of the apocalypse scenarios envisioned during the cold war. But a strike by North Korea, which is estimated to have only ten to twenty ICBMs, would be very different from a world-ending thermonuclear war. "Most people in a major city would survive if there's a nuclear explosion," says Brooke Buddemeier, a health physicist at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory who is probably the nation's leading expert on nuclear preparedness.

In 2009, FEMA issued planning guidance for a terrorist attack that involved a ten-kiloton blast at ground level, a bomb almost equivalent to those dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In that scenario, everything within a half-mile of ground zero would be destroyed, but most people beyond that—though they might be badly injured by the flash, blast wave, and flying debris—would survive. Those downwind of the explosion would have only minutes to move inside quickly to safety to avoid clouds of lethal radiation.

The key is to get inside as quickly as possible. If you can shelter within ten to fifteen minutes, you can avoid the most damaging radiation.

Even a more powerful weapon doesn't radically change those parameters: The "severe damage" zone, i.e., total destruction, of a hundred-kiloton blast would roughly double, to a one-mile blast radius. "The critical reactions are what takes place in those first minutes or hours," Buddemeier says. "When we think about a nuclear detonation, most people think only about the smoking crater. The fallout can go out tens or hundreds of miles downwind."

For this reason, officials say, the instinct to flee is a dangerous one to heed. "Previously what we've chosen to practice is evacuation—the fire alarm goes off, get out. It's understandable—there's a hazard, take action," says Buddemeier. But a panicked, uninformed attempt to escape could prove even more deadly than the initial blast, as civilians risk unnecessary exposure to radiation and rescuers fail to grasp potentially lifesaving measures like the fact that they can safely move into the damage zone as long as they stay upwind of the fallout cloud. "That's a big mental shift we're trying to get people through. Just like a tornado, getting into the center of the building or down into the basement is much better than trying to outrun the fallout."

The key is to get inside as quickly as possible. If you can shelter within ten to fifteen minutes, you can avoid the most damaging radiation. "What is a good shelter? Concrete, underground, center of the building if you have time," Hawaii's Miyagi says. "Get as low [in a building] as possible." If you're caught outside and survive the blast? Get inside and get naked. Simply removing your clothes eliminates 90 percent of radioactivity.

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Most of the officials I spoke to recommended a relatively simple home-preparedness kit that includes a hand-crank radio capable of receiving emergency broadcasts and enough food and water to survive at least forty-eight hours. A week's worth of supplies is even better, but even a two- or three-day stockpile ought to be enough, they say, to outlast the worst of the radiation and give the government time to mobilize a response. "If it's safe in the building, stay there until you're told it's safe to leave. You're safest in your basement or the center of your apartment building," says Eliot Calhoun, a nuclear-disaster planner at New York City's Emergency Management Department.

But they also acknowledged that we shouldn't expect to be rescued quickly. By design, the first week of a rescue mission will be up to local and state officials. The federal government's massive resources will take at least three to seven days to arrive. And as the slow, groaning response to Puerto Rico's devastating Hurricane Maria showed, they very well could take even longer.

The best news is that a North Korean attack remains unlikely. Even for planners in the most likely blast zones, North Korea is far down on their list of threats. "It's suicide for Kim Jong Un," Miyagi says. "I'm counting on the fact he's not an idiot." Graff says, "An earthquake is absolutely still top of my list. We're getting closer to another one every day."

For his part, Buddemeier says he hopes that his life's work is ultimately proved useless. As he says, "If my career is for naught, I'll be a happy man."

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