

Heed old shelter signs? If nuke is REALLY coming, maybe not

January 17 2018, by Colleen Long



In this Tuesday, Jan. 16, 2018 photo, a fallout shelter sign hangs on a building on East 9th Street in New York. The fallout shelters, marked with metal signs featuring the symbol for radiation—three joined triangles inside a circle—were set up in tens of thousands of buildings nationwide in the early 1960s amid the nuclear arms race. In New York City alone there were believed to be about 18,000. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

A generation of Americans knew just what to do in the event of a

nuclear attack—or during a major false alarm, like the one over the weekend in Hawaii. Take cover in a building bearing a yellow fallout shelter symbol.

But these days, that might not be the best option, or even an option at all.

Relics from the Cold War, the aging shelters that once numbered in the thousands in schools, courthouses and churches haven't been maintained. And conventional wisdom has changed about whether such a [shelter](#) system is necessary in an age when an attack is more likely to come from a weak rogue state or terrorist group rather than a superpower.

"We're not in a Cold War scenario. We are in 2018," said Dr. Irwin Redlener, head of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute. "We're not facing what we were facing 50 years ago, when the Soviet Union and the U.S. had nuclear warheads pointed at each other that would devastate the world. There's a threat, but it's a different type of threat today."

People weren't sure what to do Saturday when Hawaii mistakenly sent a cellphone alert warning of an incoming ballistic missile and didn't retract it for 38 minutes. The state had set up the missile warning infrastructure after North Korea demonstrated its missiles had the range to reach the islands. Drivers abandoned cars on a highway and took shelter in a tunnel. Parents huddled in bathtubs with their children. Students bolted across the University of Hawaii campus to take cover in buildings.



In this Tuesday, Jan. 16, 2018 photo, fallout shelter signs hang on a lamp post on East 11th Street in New York. In a real nuclear strike, taking cover in a building bearing the rusted yellow fallout-shelter symbol may not be the best option anymore. Experts say the shelters in schools and courthouses are often aging relics from the Cold War that haven't been maintained. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

The false alarm is the perfect time to talk about what to do in such an emergency, Redlener said, because most of the time people don't want to talk about it. At all.

"But it's a real possibility," he said. "City officials should be talking about what their citizens should do if an attack happened. And it's a necessity for individuals and families to talk about and develop their own plan of what they would do."

New Yorkers who were asked this week about where they would seek

shelter during a missile attack said they had no idea.

"The only thing I can think is, I would run," said Sabrina Shephard, 45, of Manhattan. "Where we would run, I don't know, because I don't know if New York has any bomb shelters or anything."



In this Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo, a bay of bunkbeds can be seen in a crescent shaped room inside a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker in New Orleans. A generation of Americans knew just what to do in the event of a nuclear attack - or during a major false alarm, like the one over the weekend in Hawaii. Take cover in a building bearing a yellow fallout shelter symbol. But these days, that might not be the best option, or even an option at all. (Max Becherer /The Advocate via AP)

The fallout shelters, marked with metal signs featuring the symbol for radiation—three joined triangles inside a circle—were set up in tens of

thousands of buildings nationwide in the early 1960s amid the nuclear arms race. In New York City alone there were believed to be about 18,000.

The locations were chosen because they could best block radioactive material. Anything could be a shelter as long as it was built with concrete, cinder blocks or brick, had no windows, and could be retrofitted quickly with supplies, an air filtration system and potable water.

But the idea was controversial from the start, especially since one of the scenarios at the time, a full-scale nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, would have left few survivors. By the 1970s, the concept was abandoned. A FEMA spokeswoman said the agency doesn't even have current information on where the shelters are located.

New York City education officials announced last month they are taking down the fallout shelter signs at schools. In Minot, North Dakota, just a few miles from the base where dozens of U.S. missiles are at the ready, a few fallout shelter signs remain, but their status as viable refuges isn't known.



In this Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo, a flashlight illuminates the main command center of a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker in New Orleans. The fallout shelters, marked with metal signs featuring the symbol for radiation - three joined triangles inside a circle - were set up in tens of thousands of buildings nationwide in the early 1960s amid the nuclear arms race. (Max Becherer /The Advocate via AP)

So what should you do if there is a nuclear attack now?

The good news: You may actually survive, because a [nuclear attack](#) today is more likely to be just one bomb—perhaps a small device, smuggled into a city inside a truck, or a single missile lobbed by North Korea that actually makes it across the water. The bad news: You have between 15 and 20 minutes to get to a safe space.

Eliot Calhoun, a disaster planner for New York's Emergency

Management Department, said the smartest thing to do is stay put in a spot with as few windows and as many walls as possible.

"Don't go outside unless you absolutely must," he said.



In this Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo, old office equipment stands in a room near the entryway of a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker located in the neutral ground of West End Boulevard near Robert E. Lee Boulevard in New Orleans, La. Relics from the Cold War, the aging shelters that once numbered in the thousands in schools, courthouses and churches haven't been maintained. And conventional wisdom has changed about whether such a shelter system is necessary in an age when an attack is more likely to come from a weak rogue state or terrorist group rather than a superpower. (Max Becherer /The Advocate via AP)

Subterranean subway stations might be a good place to shelter if you happen to be in one when an attack happens, but experts say tunnels could also be dangerous if they are structurally compromised by a blast.

New Yorker Joe Carpenter emerged from a post office with a faded fallout shelter sign this week and admitted that he had never thought about what to do in the event of an incoming missile.

"I probably would just huddle with the masses and go along with the crowd, because I've never really considered it," he said. "It's like everything else: Do we really ponder what's at the end of the road?"



In this Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo, a container of waterless hand cleaner sits in a storage room inside an abandoned Cold War era Civil Defense bunker in New Orleans. Relics from the Cold War, the aging shelters that once numbered in the thousands in schools, courthouses and churches haven't been maintained. And conventional wisdom has changed about whether such a shelter system is necessary in an age when an attack is more likely to come from a weak rogue state or terrorist group rather than a superpower. (Max Becherer /The Advocate)

via AP)



In this Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo, an infirmary complete with a medical bed and medical instruments is seen inside a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker in New Orleans. Relics from the Cold War, the aging shelters that once numbered in the thousands in schools, courthouses and churches haven't been maintained. And conventional wisdom has changed about whether such a shelter system is necessary in an age when an attack is more likely to come from a weak rogue state or terrorist group rather than a superpower. (Max Becherer /The Advocate via AP)



In this Tuesday, Sept. 26, 2017 photo, Derek Boese, the Chief Administrative and Public Information Officer for the Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, uses a flashlight to illuminate the stair well of a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker in New Orleans. In a real nuclear disaster, taking cover in a building bearing a rusted yellow fallout shelter symbol may not be the best option anymore. Experts say the shelters in schools and courthouses are often aging relics from the Cold War that haven't been maintained. And conventional wisdom has changed. (Max Becherer /The Advocate via AP)



In this Tuesday, Jan. 16, 2018 photo, a fallout shelter sign hangs on a building on East 9th Street in New York. A generation of Americans knew just what to do in the event of a nuclear attack—or during a major false alarm, like the one over the weekend in Hawaii. Take cover in a building bearing the yellow fallout shelter symbol. But these days, that might not be the best option, or even an option at all. (AP Photo/Mary Altaffer)

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