

# News and Comment

## **Civil Defense: Kennedy's Failure To Fight for Program Raises Question of Whether He Has Changed His Mind**

President Kennedy has appealed for the salvation of his civil defense program after 6 months of standing by quietly while the program wasted away in Congress.

The attempt to rescue civil defense is the latest episode in the curious saga of Kennedy and fallout shelters, a complex drama full of vacillations and conflicting motivations, somewhat on the order of those that dominated the Cuban fiasco. From the sum of events there arises the question of whether Kennedy has had misgivings about his announced decision to build a nationwide system of fallout shelters. The evidence is contradictory, but substantial enough on both sides to make the question a real one.

Ironically, the question arises at a time when the federal Civil Defense Office, which Kennedy reorganized and moved into the Defense Department, has achieved a remarkable degree of efficiency. Doubt may exist about the wisdom of the program, but for the first time since civil defense became a national goal, in 1950, there exists an organization that is able to achieve the objectives decreed from above, however worth while those objectives may be. The proof is that within 6 months, 37 million shelter spaces across the country will have been located, marked, and provisioned; this is about 37 million more than were made available during civil defense's first 10 years. They may be no more useful than caterpillar tents, but they will be there.

### **Future of Civil Defense**

At issue now is the question of where the Administration wants civil defense to go from here? It is on this point that Kennedy's performance has aroused

speculation, because the amount of support he himself has given the program since its first days has been conspicuously limited. The suspicion thus exists that the Administration is too tightly lashed to its civil defense program to repudiate it, but in view of what seems to be deep-seated public opposition to civil defense, would not be at all disconcerted to see Congress take the rap for killing it off or keeping it at a low level of expenditure.

The immediate cause of the Administration's new public performance in behalf of civil defense is the ruthless disemboweling of the program by Rep. Albert Thomas, Democrat of Texas, an old foe of civil defense, who is in a position to make his views affect the course of events. Thomas, who regularly exercised this power to butcher civil defense throughout the Eisenhower Administration, is chairman of the House Independent Offices Appropriations Subcommittee, a five-man body responsible for passing on civil defense money requests. The subcommittee's decisions are subject to approval by the full House, but appropriations subcommittees almost always exercise a decisive influence on matters that come before them, and they are usually dominated by their chairman. This subcommittee is no exception.

The decision of Thomas's group was not only to deny the Administration's request for funds to expand the present program but actually to reduce the program below its present level. That level, \$207 million, was achieved through an adroit but temporary maneuver around the subcommittee last year. The request for this year, \$695 million, went directly to the subcommittee. Its verdict was \$75 million—a figure which would make civil defense the most ill-treated of the New Frontier programs that have not met outright death in Congress.

Kennedy's response was a last-minute

appeal to Congress urging salvation of the program. The outcome, at best, may be the inclusion of enough additional funds to complete the planned marking and provisioning of 60 million shelter spaces in existing buildings, but Congress is not likely to go beyond that. About \$140 million was appropriated last year for these spaces; it is estimated that another \$65 million will be needed to complete the program. Some \$460 million of the funds refused by the subcommittee were intended for the next phase of the fallout shelter program, federal contributions to help finance establishment of 100 million community shelter spaces in public buildings. The subcommittee denied these funds on the ground that legislation authorizing the program is yet to be passed; the House Armed Services Committee, through which such legislation would have to pass, has no intention of holding hearings this session. Its chairman, Rep. Carl Vinson, Democrat of Georgia, has advised the President that the country is not ready for this phase of civil defense, but can be prepared for it by successful completion of the less ambitious parts of the program; thus, the community shelter program is beyond retrieval in this session of Congress.

Vinson, in effect, was telling Kennedy that there is hope if the Administration wishes to develop the program further, but the ingredients in Kennedy's relationship with civil defense do not suggest that the Administration will be primed to renew the fight over civil defense when Congress convenes in January.

### **A Political Orphan**

There is no doubt, for example, that Kennedy is going to fight hard for medical care for the aged and for increased federal aid for education. These are well-established items in the New Frontier's legislative program; they have strong and constant congressional support, even if not to the point where they can command majorities; they are deeply rooted in the traditions of the Democratic Party, and they command substantial political support throughout the country.

Civil defense, on the other hand, turns out to be a political orphan that was suddenly adopted by Kennedy after he managed to spend a good portion of his political career paying it scarcely any attention at all. Throughout the

presidential campaign, for example, Kennedy addressed himself to virtually every aspect of American life on which government has even the remotest bearing. Nevertheless, examination of his collected and indexed campaign speeches, press conferences, and statements fails to turn up one reference to civil defense. This silence was satisfactory to his domestic political advisers, most of whom concluded that the waste and confusion associated with a decade of inept civil defense efforts had so soured the public on the subject that no political purpose would be served by tying Kennedy to a shelter program.

However, while civil defense found no place in the election campaign, it did come to occupy an important place in Kennedy's strategic thinking, which was influenced by the view that since the U.S. government acknowledges the possibility that nuclear weapons may be used, it has a responsibility to take steps to protect the population. The concept did not take root quickly. Despite the urgency that he later attributed to the need for a start on civil defense, Kennedy said nothing about it in his State of the Union message in January 1961, nor in his special defense message in March. After having maintained silence on civil defense through the first 5 months of his presidency, Kennedy announced plans to revamp and enlarge the program. The occasion for his announcement was a message to Congress on "Urgent public needs," delivered 25 May as the Berlin crisis was warming up again, and just a few days before he was to meet Khrushchev in Vienna.

Adoption of a realistic and consistent civil defense program, he said, was long overdue. To achieve it, he continued, he would move civil defense responsibilities into the Defense Department and seek to triple the existing budget. At the same time Kennedy warned that too much could not be expected of civil defense, since "it cannot give an assurance of blast protection that will be proof against surprise attack or guarantee against obsolescence or destruction. And it cannot deter a nuclear attack."

Then, in concluding his remarks on civil defense, he added the words that were to provide an utterly confused start for the program and raise questions as to how much thought had gone into the preparation of his remarks:

"Financial participation will also be required from State and local govern-

ments and from private citizens. But no insurance is cost-free; and every American citizen and his community must decide for themselves whether this form of survival insurance justifies the expenditure of effort, time and money. For myself, I am convinced that it does."

A lot of citizens and organizations took Kennedy up on his invitation to "decide for themselves," eventually forcing the Administration into its long and confused retreat from emphasis on private shelters. When Kennedy next spoke to the nation on civil defense, on 25 July in a speech on the Berlin crisis, he made no reference to the earlier invitation for each citizen to make up his mind about civil defense and contribute to it financially if he chose. Thereafter, Kennedy slowly but steadily withdrew from the civil defense picture, limiting himself to an occasional press-conference statement and a message to Congress in support of his budget request. When the much-publicized booklet "Fallout Protection" was finally issued, in December, after several revisions in which Kennedy himself had had a hand, it carried an introduction signed by Defense Secretary McNamara. At one point there had been thought of putting the President's signature there.

#### Civil Defense Office

Meanwhile, the Civil Defense Office, under the direction of a Washington attorney, Stuart Pittman, was performing in an efficient fashion quite foreign to civil defense. Its principal achievement was to complete the survey of existing shelter space several months ahead of schedule and for about two-thirds of the budgeted cost. Other work included a number of research and development projects on warning devices, including one called the National Emergency Alarm Repeater System (NEAR), intended for installation in every home and office in the country at a cost of about \$10 a unit.

Although Pittman's operation was moving along in relatively smooth fashion across the nation, by spring it was apparent that it was in trouble on Capitol Hill. It was believed that Thomas would take a more kindly view of the civil defense program if he felt assured that the inept performance of the past decade was not being continued by this Administration. Nevertheless, when Pittman appeared before Thomas's subcommittee last March, it was apparent

from the line of questioning that the *efficiency* of the Civil Defense Office concerned Thomas and his colleagues much less than the concept that civil defense was a rational response to part of the menace of nuclear attack. Basing their doubts on the opposition to civil defense that had been expressed by academic and scientific groups, members of the subcommittee frequently made critical observations such as "some of the outstanding scientists in the United States when asked about the fallout shelter program pointed out what a feeble measure it is against potential attack." Civil defense officials countered with testimony that there were scientists who thought otherwise. (Thomas at one point inquired, "Do you have any Nobel Prize winners in the field of chemistry or biology?" He also wanted to know why the Office of Civil Defense did not develop fallout suits as a substitute for the costly fallout shelter system.) The hearings and subsequent contacts between civil defense officials and congressmen made it plain that the program, no matter how well it was going, was in legislative trouble. At this stage civil defense officials started to look to their political superiors for assistance; they found very little available.

The details are not clear but in general it appears that the Office of Civil Defense had a hard time getting through to the White House. For one thing, a number of people around the President, while loyally accepting civil defense as an Administration goal, were personally indifferent or opposed to it. They did not seek to block the program, but then neither did they take any special steps to further it. In conversations with congressmen and others they were not beyond acknowledging that they had serious doubts about the value of the program. Meanwhile, the President, who is an avid newspaper reader, was not unaware that civil defense was in trouble in Congress. He is reported to have attempted to sway Thomas to take a generous approach to the program, but civil defense officials do not feel that the President's actions in behalf of civil defense reflected any feeling of urgency on his part. After months of silence, he finally issued a strong statement in behalf of the program, but that came only after Thomas's subcommittee had chopped it down to a point where it would exist in name only.

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