

VIEWPOINT

Spare Tires Cause Flats!

BY CLAYTON CRAMER

You and four friends are about to go to the beach. You open the trunk of your car to throw in beach chairs, soft drinks, and towels. Suddenly, your friends back off in horror. There, in your trunk, is a spare tire and a jack!

Your first friend exclaims in amazement, "It really doesn't matter if you have a spare. If we get a flat, we'll have a blowout, fly off the road, and die. So why bother to have a spare?"

Your second friend stalks off, shouting, "By being prepared with a spare, you must support the *concept* of flats."

Your third friend gently admonishes, "People prepared to survive a flat have no incentive to make the roads safer for the rest of us. Is that fair?"

Your fourth friend glares at you and demands, "Why did you waste money on a jack and a spare tire? You could have bought food for our beach party."

Does this series of reactions sound ridiculous? Of course. But they mirror arguments that pop up all the time in the current wave of hostility to civil-defense measures, both public and private, to protect against nuclear war.

Since 1981, most activists opposing nuclear weapons have taken positions against any preparations to save lives in the event of nuclear war. These positions generally fall into one of four categories: (1) fatalism; (2) preparation for bad things makes them happen; (3) prepared people don't care if disaster comes; (4) preparedness is a waste of money. These are the objections that are clearly absurd when applied to cars and flat tires. Examination shows that they aren't any more relevant to nuclear weapons and nuclear war.

Consider the first position. The critic of civil defense laments that if World War III starts, most of us will be destroyed by the nuclear blasts.

This view is widespread but false. In fact, a full-scale nuclear war would leave tens of millions of people alive in America. It is a major misconception, dispelled by perusal of Soviet doctrine, that cities would be the primary targets in such a war. But even in major cities hit by nuclear bombs, there would be a great many people alive in fringe areas. Survivors would, in our present state of unpreparedness, die not of radiation but of

starvation, thirst, disease, and most of all ignorance.

The second kind of objection to civil defense is perhaps the most perplexing. The person who would prepare to survive nuclear war is said "to approve of the *concept* of nuclear war." This is said with the most earnest of expressions, and the strongest possible emphasis on that word *concept*.

For people who think this line of argument makes sense, life should be very simple. They no longer need seat belts (because seat belts mean you approve of

government from a first strike.)

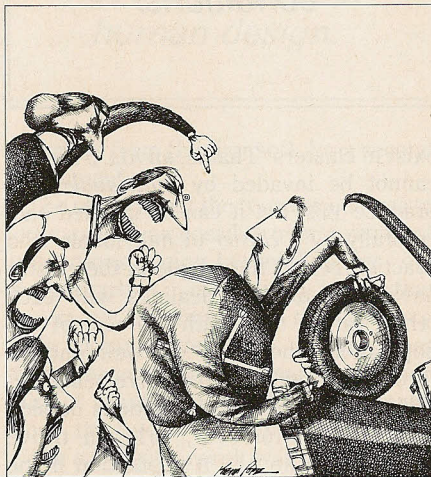
The third objection to civil defense involves the claim that survivalists aren't interested in working to avoid World War III, because, having prepared for such an event, they don't think they'll get hurt in a nuclear war.

Yet just the opposite is true. The more one studies the mechanics of surviving nuclear war, the more awesome nuclear war becomes. I believe I have about a 25 percent chance of surviving a major nuclear war, considering the preparations I have made for it, where I live, and the nuclear-war scenarios I can envision. I have never met a survivalist who was so completely confident he would survive such an event that he no longer cared about whether or not it occurred.

Finally, there are the cost objections. Nuclear-war civil defense, usually assumed to be the province of government, is said to be a waste of taxpayers' money.

It is hard to believe that the same government that runs the post office, buys military equipment, and operates a welfare system that benefits its workers more than it benefits the poor could possibly do an efficient job of providing civil defense. But the cost objection would be more impressive if its proponents were trying to reduce government spending rather than to redirect the money into their pet government boondoggles. It would also be more impressive if its proponents were less hostile to *private* civil-defense efforts.

I can see how knowledgeable, well-meaning people can support a nuclear freeze; I voted for the California nuclear-freeze initiative in 1982. I can also see how well-meaning people could support unilateral nuclear disarmament, although they would have to be ignorant of history. But I *cannot* understand why groups that oppose nuclear war and the countless deaths that would result are opposed to efforts that *could* save millions of lives, should nuclear war occur. And I'd bet that they carry spare tires and jacks in their cars.



the *concept* of traffic accidents); there's no need to vaccinate their children against polio (because vaccination means you approve of the *concept* of polio); and they certainly don't need medical insurance (having medical insurance means you approve of the *concept* of horrendous medical bills).

According to a more sophisticated form of this argument, occasionally advanced by "establishment" politicians, the Soviet Union might believe that US civil-defense efforts signal a willingness to fight a nuclear war. (After all, that is what the US government frequently claims is indicated by massive *Soviet* civil-defense efforts.)

But the opposite conclusion can be drawn, as well. If the Soviet Union thinks the United States might survive a nuclear war with much of its population and productive capacity intact, the temptation to use nuclear weapons in a first strike is *lessened*. (Likewise, Soviet civil-defense efforts could deter the US

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