

Batavia Explodes: Cold War Anxiety, Civil Defense, and the Preparedness Drill at the Veterans Hospital in 1956

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Introduction

On Friday, September 14th, 1956, a Civil Defense Exercise was conducted at Batavia's Veterans Administration Hospital. At ten o'clock that morning Civil Defense sirens could be heard as a result of a simulated fire raging in Ward D as a result of an "explosion." The simulated fire was part of a "disaster test" designed to recreate the conditions that would be produced in the event of an explosion produced by an "enemy attack." On that same day the Batavia Post Office building was almost completely destroyed as a consequence of bomb detonation. As a result of this second simulated attack a postal truck took emergency supplies and equipment to a relocation site reached via West Main Street and Redfield Parkway. A second postal truck supervised by the Foreman of Mails, Arthur Norton, transported more people and equipment over Jefferson Avenue, Washington Avenue, Ellicott Avenue, Richmond Avenue, and the Redfield Parkway. A third postal truck remained on a standby basis, while the Veterans Hospital Supply Officer, John Lane, ordered one truck to facilitate removal from what was left of the Post Office building while simultaneously keeping eight additional vehicles on a standby basis. In its Saturday edition, *The Daily News* reported that the exercise was an unqualified success. Drawing upon volunteers who responded to sirens located throughout the County, this drill serves as a stark reminder of the political and cultural realities of Cold War America in 1956.

One could of course simply describe the events of September 14th with a mere narrative – the fire in Ward D simply broke out at 10 a.m., and within five minutes three pieces of fire equipment were at the disaster scene, followed twenty minutes later by an additional eleven pieces, etc., etc. But such a narrative, while interesting, begs the obvious question – why did a "disaster" produced by the "enemy" take place at all? In addition, other questions are then raised. What was the nature of this "disaster," why was there a clear anxiety about its real possibility; who was this "enemy," and how could such an intrusion reach into the very heart of an otherwise stable and peaceful Genesee County in 1956?

Therefore, in this short discussion I seek to invoke what one scholar almost half a century ago referred to as "thick description." In other words, a narrative detailing what happened while simultaneously offering a context for what is otherwise a factual rendition. And here, the

only way to understand why the feigned disaster was happening at all means to situate it within the wider context of Cold War America in 1956.

What Happened – And Why

To fully appreciate the events of September 14th in Batavia one has to place them squarely within the Cold War moment of 1956. In strictly chronological terms, the Cold War encompassed a broader period. Historians generally agree that it can be dated from the end of World War Two in 1945 through the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This conflict between the communist and the non-communist world displayed five central characteristics, all of which were on display in Batavia in September of 1956. The first of these is what Charles E. Watson, the President of General Motors, once referred to as the “permanent war economy.” As numerous historians have long argued, the maintenance of such a setting required the perpetuation of an atmosphere of ceaseless crisis – a social environment clearly evident in the Batavia V.A. drill.

A second feature of the Cold War discernible in this drill is the necessity of a popular culture that allows for the militarization of a society in which permanent arms escalation makes sense. This was of course the historical moment of Mickey Spillane stories about the killing of communists associated with the chief Cold War rival – the USSR; comic strips presenting a Captain America fighting to make America safe from Soviet enemies; “duck and cover” exercises for children at school, etc. When the hospital mandated employees to view the film “One Plane, One Bomb, One City” in the week leading up to the drill, the hospital was simply participating in what had become by 1956 standard cultural fare in Cold War America.

A third Cold War motif discoverable in the Batavia drill was the misconception that there are ways for people to protect themselves against the effects of a nuclear blast. This was a time in which such analysts as Herman Kahn, in *On Thermonuclear War*, contended that it is possible to actually undertake a nuclear war *without* producing total destruction. Henry Kissinger made the same point along these lines a year later, when in 1957 he asserted that a nuclear war does not have to be as destructive as many assumed it would be. Therefore, the Batavia drill featured actions designed to reassure the general public in a psychological sense but which, in a purely scientific sense, were meaningless. Post-explosion radiological surveys designed to offer areas for medical treatment of victims conceivably near ground zero; temporary aid stations at the John Kennedy School; neatly organized medical supply stations; and dispatchers at the Batavia Fire headquarters sending equipment to the VA Hospital are all examples of efforts to utterly deny the devastating consequences of an atomic blast.

Such an atmosphere resulted from a Cold War requirement of unprecedented American involvement in international affairs. Consequently, the Cold War produced a peacetime army that took the place of token American forces which had been a tradition since 1783. Joined with the newly created Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Council, and RAND (Research and Development), this peacetime army – with a peacetime draft – normalized the sense of urgency and danger which so characterized the Cold War. Should it surprise us, then, to see the presence of Army Weapons Carriers in the streets of Batavia during this drill, or of Army ambulances transporting blast victims?

This permanent international involvement is indicative of yet a fifth Cold War theme being played out during the Batavia V.A. drill. The Cold War was not simply a traditional conflict between great powers. It was instead an ideological clash between communism and a free capitalist society. This ideological aspect was consistently expressed during the drill – and the week leading up to the drill. For example, VA chaplains spoke of the drill's significance in this respect in services conducted on Sunday, September 9th. The coordinating committee of the drill included Catholic nuns. Since in a nuclear age head-on war was not possible, much of the Cold War – when not being fought through smaller nations – was one fought on the terrain of ideas. And chief among these was the idea of the freedom of individual conscience. Hence the symbol of the chaplains and the nuns – America was a free society in which individuals could follow their faith without governmental interference. This contrasted sharply with the official atheism of the USSR. The Batavia drill was, then, as much as anything else, a civil exercise in the demonstrated superiority of American-style democracy. The containment of an evil communist system was therefore evident in many small towns around the country in 1956 – and Batavia was not an exception.

The Drill

According to the “Observers Report - Disaster Exercise” at the V.A. Hospital in Batavia on the 14th of September, 1956, the drill began promptly at 10 a.m. A simulated fire, produced “by a theoretical explosion,” induced chaos on Ward D. Charles S. Livingston, a V.A. physician and the Hospital's manager, then called upon the Civil Defense disaster Coordinator, M.O. Clement, to coordinate assistance from the civil defense forces and the Genesee County Mutual Fire System.

Events then moved very quickly. Several minutes' later firefighting equipment began to arrive at the Hospital. General C.R. Huebner, the New York State Civil Defense Director, was notified of the “disaster,” and learned from Mr. Clement that fifty Batavians had been hurt.

Situation reports were then relayed to General Huebner, keeping the General informed and also requesting that the state send needed medical supplies. The New York State Civil Defense Commission provided one hundred units of narcotics, one hundred fifty litter cots, blankets, dressings, and medical supplies. The American Red Cross and the Salvation Army then orchestrated blood supplies and canteen work respectively. Blood supplies were flown in from Buffalo, and transportation and police escorts were then organized. By 11:06 General Huebner notified Mr. Clement that four hundred doses of sedatives were being flown in from Olean, New York. By 11:08 Mr. Clement told General Huebner that the crisis was under control and that additional assistance would not be required. Along the way, subsequent to civil defense sirens being sounded, twelve Genesee County fire departments sent some of their units to Batavia to help with the “disaster.” Throughout the day Civil Defense Auxiliary Police worked to guard the entrances to the Hospital and to keep all streets leading to the Hospital clear.

The fire departments used water from the artificial lake located on the V.A. grounds, and reported that the “fire” was under control in about one-half of an hour. Despite the “explosion” and “fire” the water supply in the Hospital was reported to be functioning. “Casualties” were found lying in the Hospital hallways, where the “distribution of local supplies of drugs and blood was prompt.” In a federal government memorandum dated September 17th, 1956, it was concluded that the drill, designed to simulate the “reality” of an atomic blast, revealed “efficient planning and organization” and “relative quiet in the evacuation process.” The drill, and the official appraisals of it; paint a picture of a nuclear attack as one in which those who are injured and sick from radioactive poisoning would be tended to by a calm, reassuring, and efficient medical and governmental apparatus. Indeed, the assumption that there would be a medical and governmental apparatus in place *after* the attack was one that was never questioned.

Analysis

The drill reveals an America in which a crisis of a seemingly permanent nature is a natural part of life. A culture of fear and anxiety enveloped American life, and Batavia in 1956 proved to be no exception here. As the *New York State Civil Defense Newsletter* reminded readers, drills such as the one in Batavia is part of a “Plan for Survival” which was a necessary response to a condition of permanent war. But fear alone could be paralyzing, so a sense of optimism needed to be maintained if one could only believe that a nuclear attack is not necessarily fatal.

Hence it is not surprising that the drill so confidently depicted available water supplies, medicines, trained medical personnel capable of attending to the wounded, rationally organized and maintained air and land transport routes, and fully-functioning utilities even

amidst the horror of a nuclear blast. In effect, Batavia served – as countless other towns did around the United States in the 1950s – as a giant air raid shelter in which the general public could indeed – and comfortably so – survive a nuclear blast.

The permanent war exuded clarity – this was a titanic struggle between good and evil in which there could be no room for doubt about the possibility of survival. Nowhere in such drills could realities such as 1,500 Hiroshima-size atomic bombs in the U.S. arsenal alone by 1962 – in other words, ten tons of TNT for every man, woman, and child on earth – be acknowledged. The inherent uncertainties of a nuclear attack simply precluded the possibility of the assumptions built into the Batavia drill. The thrust of the drill was a civil defense predicated upon evacuation and sheltering. In an actual attack this would have proved futile. For example, an enemy intent on attacking a population could just as easily retarget populations fleeing or being transported to other areas. And even if populations could be transported, it would not ultimately matter, as protection against the blast, intense radiation, heat, and mass fires would render evacuation – and medical care – superfluous. The drill embodied – as similar drills around the United States throughout the 1950s – that life can be lived indefinitely on top of a pile of nuclear weapons. Not wanting to face what that can really mean in the event of a nuclear exchange, Americans in the 1950s – including those in the Batavian drill – encouraged a view of the nuclear world which denied the obvious. The point of such public exercises was to accustom people to the routine denial of imminent danger. In effect, people tiptoed around the peril without really acknowledging the nature of the actual crisis – the distinct possibility of an atomic explosion capable of wielding a mortal blow to human survival itself. Instead, all that remained was the purported moral legitimacy of the struggle between the U.S. and the USSR, and the belief that if need be, a nuclear war could be won and there would be survivors in a recognizable world, capable of carrying on even in a post-blast age.

Conclusion

In so many ways – and despite the popular imagery of “Happy Days” and “Grease” – America in the 1950s was uncertain, anxious, and in some ways, adrift. Frustration over the inability to confront in a traditional fashion the Soviet communist system was a frustration with modern life itself – the same modern technology and science that had produced so many benefits had also conjured up a world in which simpler notions of us or them, right or wrong, could not be approached in ways precluded by the specter of nuclear war.

As a result, fantasy worlds could be created – worlds neat and tidy and predictable *despite* an atomic blast. The possibility of an atomic blast was rooted in a view of the world in which

America's permanent post-World War Two mission was to convey an image of the United States as one in which Americans defend liberty – at all costs – even in a nuclear age. And that defense could translate into victory, even in a world living with the shadow of a mushroom cloud. All of this despite the ironic comment of President Eisenhower in 1956, who stated in a little-known letter that the U.S. and the USSR must “meet at the conference table with the understanding that the era of armaments has ended, and the human race must conform its actions to this truth or die.” But despite such concerns the alleged possibility of actually winning a nuclear war persisted. Viewing the world as so many did in the 1950s had unfortunate consequences later on, as the division of the world into “us” and “them” helped to pave the way into the quagmires of wars around the world and which would take us into a discussion going far beyond our scope here today. But maybe, in the end, the most ironic development of all was the eventual triumph of American freedom over the darkness of Soviet tyranny. And to think that it ultimately happened without nuclear war. One can only hope that such good fortune will continue into the foreseeable future.