

The Evolution of American *Civilian Defense* into Modern *Emergency Management*

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The **Council of National Defense** was an organization formed during World War I to coordinate resources and industry in support of the United States war effort.² It consisted of several executive cabinet secretaries as well as the heads of the Armed Services. The mission of this Council was to advise the President and heads of executive departments, on the strategic placement of industrial goods and services for potential and future use in times of war. The Council properly served its purpose during the war years, then suspended in 1921. Eighteen years later in 1939, the war in Europe awoke mayors of U.S. cities to revise plans for civilian defense.

In 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established an **Office for Emergency Management** within the Executive Office of the President.³ Among the tasks that office was given, was to maintain liaison between the President and the **Council of National Defense**, a Council that FDR revived some three days later.⁴ He had tasked the Council with coordinating the nation's defense program.⁵ It was during this period that the **Division of State and Local Cooperation** was founded and became responsible for various emergency functions, including in 1940, local fire defense, as London-style aerial fire bombings were seen as a viable threat to U.S. soil.⁶ At the time, Fiorello LaGuardia was the Mayor of New York City and the president of the U.S. *Conference on Mayors*. LaGuardia spearheaded the

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² Created by act of Congress August 29, 1916 (39 Stat. 649; 50 U.S.C. ch.1) In 1917 when the U.S. entered the war, the Council of National Defense established a State Council Section to guide growth and work of state defense councils.

³ Executive Order 8248 of September 8, 1939

⁴ Pederson, William D. (ed.) *A Companion to Franklin D. Roosevelt*. London: John Wiley & Sons, 2011.

⁵ *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* Aug-Sep 1950. Chicago: Educational Foundation for Nuclear Science. 265

⁶ Developed because the U.S. grew concerned about the threat of incendiary bombs such as those that were dropped on London, the Chemical Warfare Service of the War Department trained municipal firemen on how to deal with this threat.

movement which helped get FDR to replace the Division of State and Local Cooperation with a federal office that would be more capable of helping cities and states better prepare. FDR drafted an Executive Order for an **“Office of Home Defense,”** which soon came to fruition, but under the final name, the **Office of**

Civilian Defense (OCD). Founded in 1941,⁷ FDR gave the OCD a mandate to meet a wide array of needs, including the protection of civilian populations, the maintenance of morale, and the promotion of volunteer involvement in defense. Mayor LaGuardia eagerly became the first director of the OCD, tapped by FDR after sending the President a plan that included the development of what LaGuardia envisioned as a cabinet-level, “Vast bureaucracy that would not only engineer defense drills but deter sabotage.”⁸

Even though it was drafted in 1941, the text of OCD’s founding Executive Order is somewhat similar in scope to the mission of today’s *Federal Emergency Management Agency* (FEMA). This includes the goals of the OCD that included to, “Serve as the center for the coordination of federal civilian defense [just replace ‘civilian defense’ with ‘emergency response’] activities which involve relationships between the federal government and state and local governments...”⁹ The OCD also established air-raid procedures, supervised black-outs, filled sandbags, and planned for protection against fire in case of attack.¹⁰

Civil Defense was a huge part of U.S. life during World War II. However, when the war ended, the civil defense efforts became sluggish. The OCD was abolished in 1945,¹¹ and between 1945 and 1949, civil defense was not given much attention.¹² However, this all changed once the Soviets tested an atomic bomb in

⁷ Executive Order 8757 May 20, 1941 (Which also created the *Civil Air Patrol*.)

⁸ Goldstein, Richard. *Helluva Town: The Story of New York City During World War II*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010. 10

⁹ Executive Order 8757 Establishing the Office of Civilian Defense. May 20, 1941

¹⁰ It’s interesting to note that the OCD training for various civilian volunteer positions were not unlike those of the modern *Community Emergency Response Teams* (CERT), which include clearance of debris, first aid, rescue, mass feeding, traffic control, communications, etc.

¹¹ EO 9562, June 4, 1945 (All protective property acquired under act of January 27, 1942, and act of February 21, 1942, was transferred to Department of Commerce; liquidation of OCD fiscal affairs was assigned to Treasury Department.)

¹² But this was not a universal rule. Even during the height of the Cold War, due to indifference to publicity and planning in regard to civil defense exercises, a newspaper said that it seems, “Civil defense is a baby no one wants on his doorstep.” And that same year when the president asked for a budget of \$130 for civil defense, the Congress only gave \$39.3. The same paper reported, “Local CD organizations all over the country are falling apart.” (*The Bulletin*. July 11, 1957. Bend, OR)

1949.¹³ Before the creation of the modern FEMA in 1979, the specific responsibility for civil defense in the United States was shared between a number of transitory organizations, agencies and departments.

A 1946 *War Department* study concluded that civil defense, as organized and directed by OCD, would be inadequate in any future war, and that a separate civilian agency for planning and operating civil defense matters should be set up within the War Department [which became the DoD (*Department of Defense*) the following year.¹⁴ In 1948, the **Office of Civil Defense Planning** inside the DoD was founded. This agency lasted only 15 months and later closed to become the **Civil Defense Liaison Office** of the DoD.

Many emergency preparedness planning functions were initially vested in the **National Security Resources Board** (NSRB), which was established by the *National Security Act of 1947*,¹⁵ as an independent agency to advise the President on mobilization coordination. Yet, this agency was found to be ineffective, and in 1949, the NSRB's functions were transferred to the new **Office of Defense Mobilization** (ODM).¹⁶ The ODM had been established to direct federal mobilization activities.¹⁷ It absorbed functions of the **Defense Production Administration**,¹⁸ to exercise general control of the defense production program. Part of ODM's duties included the ability to ensure the continuation of essential government and industry functions, particularly during times of crisis.¹⁹ And while ODM became one of the most powerful agencies in the federal government, by 1953²⁰ it would go on to be consolidated with another organization, the **Federal Civil Defense**

¹³ "In 1949, when the Soviet Union developed its atomic bomb, America responded with an even more powerful weapon — a thermonuclear device that used a small atomic trigger to initiate a fusion reaction in hydrogen isotopes. Successfully tested in 1952, the H-bomb seemed to guarantee America's nuclear superiority. But in August 1953, the Soviets exploded their own H-bomb, and many US military experts also believed that the Soviets could deliver their new weapon via an ICBM. For the first time, the Soviets seemed poised to take the lead in the arms race." (See: *Minuteman Missile Sites: Management Alternatives, Environmental Assessment*. Legacy Resources Management Program. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1995. 22-26

¹⁴ November 25, 1946 *War Department Memorandum* 400-5-5. This was the 'Bull Board,' headed by Maj. Gen. Harold R. Bull, organized to study problems of civil defense. (See: Harris, Mary U. "Significant Events in United States Civil Defense History Listed Chronologically, 1916-1974" *Information Services Office: DCPA*, Washington DC. February 7, 1975.)

¹⁵ (61 Stat. 499), July 26, 1947

¹⁶ Reorganization Plan No. 4 of 1949, effective August 20, 1949

¹⁷ Executive Order 10193, December 16, 1950

¹⁸ established by Executive Order 10200, January 3, 1951

¹⁹ aka 'Continuity of Government' (COG)

²⁰ Executive Order 10433

Administration (FCDA). Founded in 1951 by President Harry Truman, among its many missions was the distribution of posters, programs, and information about the threat of communist attacks.

In 1958, the ODM and the FCDA fully merged to form the **Office of Defense and Civilian Mobilization** (ODCM), with responsibility for civil defense and emergency mobilization coordination.²¹ ODCM later became the **Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization** (OCDM),²² whose job it was to administer the national civil defense program, and coordinate military, industrial, and civilian mobilization. In 1961, the organization's civil defense functions were transferred to the *Office of the Secretary of Defense*,²³ and the OCDM was split into the **Office of Emergency Planning** (OEP)²⁴ and the **Office of Civil Defense** (OCD).²⁵

OEP continued to coordinate all non-military emergency preparedness activities, principally in areas of resource utilization, civil defense, economic stabilization, post-attack rehabilitation, and government organization and continuity.²⁶ The organization later became the **Office of Emergency Preparedness** in 1968 with a mission to advise and assist the President in the coordination and determination of federal emergency preparedness policy.²⁷ The office was abolished with a reorganization in 1973.²⁸

The OCD on the other hand had been reorganized into the DoD and administered by the *U.S. Army*,²⁹ coordinating military emergency preparedness activities. It continued operations until 1972 when President Richard Nixon transformed it into the **Defense Civil Preparedness Agency** (DCPA). The DCPA coordinated and directed federal, state, and local civil defense program activities,

²¹ Reorganization Plan No. 1 of 1958, effective July 1, 1958

²² by an act of August 26, 1958 (72 Stat. 861)

²³ Executive Order 10952

²⁴ by an act of September 22, 1961 (75 Stat. 630) Public Law 87-296

²⁵ Not to be confused with the earlier "Office of Civilian Defense" founded by FDR. (This was a JFK Executive Order, 10952 on July 20, 1961)

²⁶ In June 1970, the OEP released the results a study concluding that the Nation's preparedness for natural disasters was minimal to nonexistent. The Administration responded by introducing two of its most significant domestic policy changes in National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 184. With this, for the first time in the history of civil defense, federal funds previously allocated for the exclusive purpose of preparing for military attacks could be shared with State and local governments for natural disaster preparedness.

²⁷ Executive Office of the President (EOP) by an act of October 21, 1968 (82 Stat. 1194).

²⁸ Reorganization Plan No. 2 of 1973, effective July 1, 1973. (In the summer of 1973, all functions of the Office of Emergency Preparedness were transferred to HUD, Treasury, and GSA.)

²⁹ DoD Directive 5160.50, March 31, 1964.

including fallout shelters; chemical, biological, and radiological warfare defense; emergency communications and warning systems; post-attack assistance and damage assessment; preparedness planning; and government continuity.³⁰ It provided grants and offered support to states to prepare against nuclear war. Its mission included to provide preparedness assistance planning in all areas of civil defense and natural disasters. The goals of the DCPA were to provide an effective national civil defense program and planning guidance to state and local governments in their achievement of total disaster preparedness.³¹ Nixon's DCPA eventually became an independent civil agency within the Pentagon, reporting to the Secretary of Defense.

Several other offices or agencies followed in the 1970's, all whom had seemingly overlapping missions and functions, this includes the **Office of Preparedness** of the *General Services Administration* (1973-75) and the **Federal Preparedness Agency** of the GSA (1975-79).³² The early 1970's brought massive disasters requiring major federal response and recovery operations by the **Federal Disaster Assistance Administration**, established within the *Department of Housing and Urban Development* (HUD). By 1974 the *Disaster Relief Act* firmly established the process of Presidential Disaster Declarations, still, emergency and disaster support activities remained fragmented across the many bureaucracies of the federal family. Domestic nuclear catastrophe worries of the 1970's brought attention to the fact there were many parallel programs and policies existing at the state and local level, creating a sluggishness among the efficiency of federal emergency relief efforts, and compounding their complexity.

By the mid-1970's, the *National Governor's Association* was calling for a decrease in the many duplicate federal bodies that were responsible for various disaster response activities. They asked President Jimmy Carter to centralize federal

³⁰ John E. Davis, the last director of the Office of Civil Defense became the first director of the DCPA. It should be remembered that for many decades civil defense was long a responsibility of the war fighter. It was the military and their desire to keep their guard up against an enemy from encroaching on to the U.S. soil which was their main focus, not wondering what to do with a civilian population after an earthquake or hurricane struck. Davis wanted to follow the new line of thinking in the still nascent field of professional emergency management of the early 1970's, and that was to take an all encompassing approach to hazards. Because of this, he was said to be bullish with Congress about his then forward-thinking ideas. (See: Knowles, Scott Gabriel. *The Disaster Experts: Mastering Risk in Modern America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011. 266)

³¹ *The Virgin Islands Daily News* May 9, 1972.

³² July 1973, as authorized by Executive Order 11725: (a) Federal Disaster Assistance Administration (FDAA) established by Secretary of Housing and Urban Development to administer natural disaster functions. (b) Office of Preparedness (OP) established by Administrator, General Services Administration, to develop and coordinate civil preparedness policies and plans. (Note: Effective July 1, 1975, name changed by GSA to Federal Preparedness Agency.)

emergency functions, and in 1979 (after reeling from criticism of the federal government's handling of the Three Mile Island accident),³³ the President merged the successor of the **Federal Civil Defense Administration** — the **Defense Civil Preparedness Agency** (DCPA), into a new organization, the **Federal Emergency Management Agency** (FEMA).³⁴

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the concept of civil defense was revisited under the umbrella term of *homeland security* and the all-hazards approach to emergency management was once again put in the spotlight. In 2003, FEMA was merged into the **Department of Homeland Security**. The agency's mission as of 2012 is to support citizens and first responders to ensure that as a nation they work together to build, sustain, and improve their capability to prepare for, protect against, respond to, recover from, and mitigate all hazards.

³³ Nicholson, William C. *Homeland Security Law And Policy*. Springfield: Charles C Thomas Publisher, 2005. 30

³⁴ Executive Order 12179 (Also see: Miskel, James F. *Disaster Response and Homeland Security: What Works, What Doesn't*. Stanford University Press, 2008. 67)