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Emergency services

Are you ready for the terror drill?

The Home Office has just announced that from April 4 to 8, Britain, the United States and Canada will be running a coordinated anti-terrorism exercise, simulating a biological, chemical or radioactive terrorist attack. In Britain, where it's codenamed Atlantic Blue, it will involve a real incident control room, but no live action "on the ground"; in America, where it's codenamed TOPOFF3, it will be live, and involve more than 10,000 people.

It's hard to avoid a sense of déjà vu: 50 years ago, drills for nuclear war were an annual event in New York City. Civil defence workers staged elaborately theatrical run-throughs of search and recovery missions: smoke pots and flares simulated the destruction of whole city blocks, as firemen battled the "blaze", and simulated water mains bursts sent water gushing several storeys into the air. In later years, public participation became mandatory. As hundreds of sirens sounded, cars and trains were stopped, and millions of people urged into designated shelter areas (though, apparently, the post-bomb environment would not be an enlightened one: on one occasion a group of women sought cover in a designated room in the Waldorf-Astoria hotel, only to be turned away because it was a men-only bar).

Against this background of annual drills, which became part of national "Operation Alert" exercises from 1954, there was a more generalised, well-tended, epidemic of fear. In a film shown in schools, for example, children were urged by Bert, an animated turtle, to "duck and cover" to evade the nuclear flash. In New York, and some other cities, they were issued with dog tags to identify their bodies in the event of an attack.

Unsurprisingly, there was increasing disquiet. People began to refuse to go into shelters - despite the State Defense Emergency Act, which made such actions punishable by up to a year in jail. By 1961, the final year of the drills, groups of students, conscientious

objectors and, most strikingly, families, thronged together to protest in such numbers that the authorities were unable to cope.

We're not there yet, of course, but the occasional backward look doesn't hurt when it comes to finding a balance between sensible preparation and an inappropriate stoking of fear.

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