



Is the government ready in case leadership is wiped out in a nuclear attack?

Government Contingency Plan

Ten years have passed since 9/11. Is the United States government prepared to continue operating in the face of another major attack? In the course of the decade, America has spent \$20 billion on a highly secretive plan to guarantee that the most critical elements of the federal government will continue to operate even if Washington, DC, were wiped out in an attack. In this article, we will lead you deep inside the agencies that plan for a crisis that in all likelihood will never occur.

Let's imagine for a moment that all of America's efforts to keep a watchful eye on all nuclear activities, both at home and abroad, were to prove ineffective, *c'v*, and that one day out of the clear blue sky the unthinkable happens: Washington, DC, capital of the United States of America, becomes the target of a nuclear attack.

In a millisecond, the White House, Capitol and Pentagon cease to exist. The president and his cabinet are gone, and the military's top brass are dead, wounded or missing. There is no one to lead the country. America is left with no government.

It doesn't take much imagination to realize the chaos that would quickly ensue. Think about New Orleans in the days following Hurricane Katrina. The police were forced to engage in shootouts with bands of outlaws who roamed freely, robbing, murdering and plundering. In the words of *Chazal*, "If not for fear of government, man would eat his friend alive" (*Avos* 3:2).

The good news is that—with *Hashem's* help—such an event is extremely unlikely to happen, and even if it did, the US has spent \$20 billion in the last 10 years developing a comprehensive and detailed plan to prepare a shadow government that would be capable of taking over the moment the unthinkable happens.

America in Chaos

The events of the morning of September 11, 2001, threw the entire country into chaos. Two airplanes crashed into the Twin Towers, causing them to collapse; another airplane smashed into the Pentagon, and yet another crashed in a field, presumably on its way to the White House. Rumors abounded that yet more airplanes had been hijacked and were being flown to other nationally sensitive targets.

The National Security

Council issued an order that the American government begin operating as though Washington and the entire United States were under attack. This triggered a series of feverish, secretive activities across the capital. America had prepared for such an event for decades, but was now carrying out this operation for the first time.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) chose an alternate government headquarters in Olney, Illinois, and began issuing warnings and orders to various government agencies across the country. The USAF's "1st Helicopter Squadron" sent a fleet of helicopters from Andrews Air Force Base to the National Mall—the large manicured boulevard behind the Capitol building—to rush congressional leaders to the Mount Weather Emergency Operation Center, a complex operated by FEMA in Bluemont, Virginia.

At that same moment, the Secret Service whisked First Lady Laura Bush into an underground bunker located beneath one of the Secret Service buildings. An Army helicopter that stands ready at all times at the Davidson Army Airport, 15 miles from Washington, carried off Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz to a shielded bunker located deep beneath Raven Rock Mountain in Pennsylvania and known among military leaders by the code name "Marconi."

To a casual observer it would have appeared as though the government was continuing to function like clockwork, but the truth was far from that. Fortunately, the terrorists had not done much damage to Washington, DC. If they had, the entire façade of operational functionality would have disappeared.

The Continuity of Government (COG) plan activated that day was 50 years old, a product of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. It had stemmed from fears of a nuclear attack, not of an attack using hijacked airplanes. In the 50 years since the plan had been developed, it had never been updated to reflect new realities. Once the Soviet Union disbanded, American leaders

assumed that there were no serious threats left to national security, and so, planning for a catastrophe was abandoned.

Although all top national leaders were evacuated to safety in a matter of minutes, because the plan was so badly outdated, President Bush—who was in Florida at the time—could not contact the Pentagon or White House leaders at crucial moments over the day. Secure phone lines and conferencing systems that should have been prepared for just such an eventuality did not function properly.

Presidential aides were unable to reach cabinet members, and their security staff had no idea where to go. The presidential bunker known as PEOC (an acronym for President's Emergency Operation Center) three floors below the East Wing of the White House, where the vice president remained throughout the crisis, was unable to maintain contact with the president whenever he needed it.

For a while, PEOC was unable to locate Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who was preoccupied with rescue operations at the damaged Pentagon. America was in a state of war, but the defense secretary refused to enter a secure bunker so long as he believed his assistance was still needed at the rescue site. Aside from this security detail, Rumsfeld was accompanied by an official of the Pentagon Communication Agency. Nonetheless, PEOC was unable to locate him.

Matters got so bad that at 10:08 AM President Bush angrily phoned PEOC and demanded an accounting of what was going on and who was doing what to bring matters under control. The people in the bunker had no answers for him, nor did they have a way of obtaining the information that the president was seeking.

To this day, it remains unclear whether or not Bush gave Vice President Dick Cheney the authority to order military aircraft to shoot down hijacked airplanes, as Cheney claimed at the time. Bush later said that he had handed over the authority in a conversation the two had before 10 AM.



Map of the White House; PEOC is on the right.



Mount Weather Emergency Operation Center where congressional leaders hid after 9/11.



Top presidential aides in PEOC on 9/11.



President Bush and Vice President Cheney at PEOC on the night of 9/11.

There is no sign that the two spoke before 10 AM, as claimed, and some former Bush administration members speculate that no such authority was ever granted. The 9/11 commission that was assigned to investigate government preparedness and response