

PREPARING FOR APOCALYPSE: SURVIVALIST STRATEGIES

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INTRODUCTION

Survivalists are those who believe that the United States is on the verge of collapse. They hope to survive economic, social, or nuclear disaster by making preparations for self-sufficiency and breaking away as much as possible from mainstream society. They are willing to defend what is theirs (Liebmann et al 1982). Survivalists have come under increasing public recognition and criticism. Survivalism has been condemned as an inadequate response to critical social problems, and survivalists are chided for retreating from social responsibility (Besser 1982). They are also criticized for succumbing to fear (Mitchell 1983).

My discussion focuses on survivalist strategies and practical preparations. In referring to the scenario for disaster or catastrophe, survivalists use terms such as *the collapse*, *the crash*, *apocalypse*, and *when the balloon goes up*.

METHOD

Data were collected by participant observation, letter exchanges and examination of survivalist literature. Survivalists express fear and suspicion toward strangers because of the survivalists' deviant status and stigmatization, public misconceptions, and fear of theft of their supplies. They are often reminded to: "Think, speak, and look camouflage ... at all times be wary, suspicious and distrustful of others' motives" (Epperson 1982). Although delicate methodological and ethical issues were involved, covert methods still seemed most appropriate for such a milieu. Researchers have observed that deliberately misrepresenting oneself in deviance research is not automatically an unethical practice. Some information from deviant groups can only be attained through covert means (Henslin 1972; Douglas 1972).

I attended three gun collectors' shows in southern California to get experience with the practical aspects of survivalism, and I attended the 3-day Self-Reliance and Survival Expo '83 in Pasadena California. At the Expo, 20 seminars were given, and 61 exhibitors of survivalist goods promoted various equipment

and supplies, including the *Survival Guide* and *Survive* journals. Seminar topics included *Desert Survival*, *Stress in Survival Situations*, and *the Need for Self-Reliance in Today's Society*. Finally, in collaboration with Richard Mitchell of Oregon State University, dialogue was initiated with survivalists through a secure 2-way letter exchange service. This service is widely advertized in survivalist journals, to assist survivalists who wish to contact those with similar interests without compromising anonymity or personal security. The letter exchange service proved a useful data-gathering tool when we posed as survivalists.

SURVIVAL CONTINUUM

Survivalism, like other deviant movements, is a matter of degree of commitment, based on a typology created by Linder (1982).

Level 1. Weak survivalists read survivalist literature, buy a few items such as guns and dehydrated food, and attend introductory survivalist training courses.

Level 2. More committed survivalists spend more time and money acquiring survivalist supplies and attending advanced survivalist training courses.

Level 3. Moderately committed survivalists maintain mainstream jobs, family, and friends, but they have established membership in a *retreat group*. These survivalists visit their retreat periodically throughout the year.

Level 4. Hard-core strongly committed survivalists usually have severed most social and economic ties to mainstream society, and have moved permanently onto a retreat site.

STRATEGIES

The strategy of survival is much more than an intellectual exercise for survivalists. The possibilities of social collapse, nuclear war, and economic chaos are as frightening and as palpably real as human perception can make them. One can only speculate on the time and energy which survivalists spend sifting through disaster scenarios and formulating response strategies while being mindful of constraints of physical and mental conditions, personal finances, family and employment, their location, and their philosophy of life,

and finally selecting the most feasible. For some survivalists this process amounts to little more than a game to be played sporadically throughout the year, rehearsing one's *response scenario* and mapping escape routes to the retreat site. With increasing commitment, there is an increased degree of discipline, planning, and more intense simulation of the survivalist strategies. As in wargames, they devise alternative strategies and become more flexible in order to build their *response repertoire* for various Doomsday scenarios.

There are micro and macro strategies. For example, a survivalist group may opt for escape from Los Angeles by boat and travel north to their cabin retreat on an Oregon bay, which is a macro strategy. The micro strategies concern the type of boat, supplies to be stocked, crew composition, circumstances under which they leave the city, and the exact route to Oregon. Macro strategies are openly debated and discussed in survivalist literature. Once selected, they must then be refined by individuals or groups to suit particular circumstances. It should be remembered that from the survivalist perspective, thoroughness of preparation can mean the difference between life and death.

Urban Retreating. Few suburban and urban Americans are in any position to quickly retreat to a rural community (Mitchell 1983). The majority of survivalists no doubt must remain in urban areas because the greater number of high paying jobs, and emotional bonds to family and friends are there. Very few plan to remain in urban areas after Doomsday. Here is a grim scenario for the post-catastrophe city:

Without utilities, sanitation and a public health service, most cities would become nightmares of disease within a fortnight, and if that weren't enough, the inevitable arson committed by looters and other violence-prone denizens would -- without the customary services of the fire department -- develop into firestorms, incinerating every structure and creature in the area. (Tappan 1981 30)

Field research clearly reveals that the more committed survivalist views urban life as threatening and may choose to keep firearms handy at home and in vehicles.

Marine Boat Retreating. For coastal survivalists the advantages of escape to sea by boat include speed, a self-contained vehicle which can be stocked with food beforehand, and access to one of the world's greatest food sources. Though the marine retreat would be open to attack by seaborne pirates, there would be no problem from land marauders and looters. However a boat with open sea capability costs about \$50,000, and would require good seamanship and navigation skills (Payne 1982). Knowledgeable survivalists also point out the possible danger of tidal waves from earth-quake or nuclear attack.

Wilderness Nomad Retreating. Wilderness retreating is derisively called the *mountain man* approach, and *playing Batman in the boondocks*. The escape usually involves a van, camper, trailer, motorcycle, or horse. The approach is criticized as simplistic and doomed to fail (1978 Spec Rpt 1, Delta Press Ltd). A shortage of fuel would limit the escape range, and there would be great vulnerability to gangs of looters. One cannot carry sufficient survival equipment and supplies. During the Pasadena Expo, a survivalist panel sponsored by the *Survive* Journal thoroughly discussed this method without a single panelist recommending it. One member of the audience was cautioned against it.

Wilderness Group Retreating. This retreat mode requires small isolated farms, cabins, or subterranean sites. It appears from the survivalist literature that the majority of survivalists, who recognize safety in numbers, either belong to a retreat group or are seeking to join one. However, small retreat groups would quickly become targets of hordes pouring out of devastated urban areas. The retreat area should offer a low population density and a reasonable climate for agriculture and available areas for hunting, fishing, and trapping (Tappan 1981).

Small Town Retreating. The small town retreat with about 2,000 to 3,000 population offers the best opportunity for collective defense and subsistence farming. Such a community should be sufficiently isolated from even moderate size population centers, military bases, and nuclear power plants. It should not be vulnerable to natural disasters such as

floods, quakes, and forest fires. It should also have a mild climate and adequate rainfall. Finally, the community should be inhabited by hard-working, disciplined, barter-conscious people (Tappan 1981).

PREPARATIONS

Preparations are categorized as micro and macro. The macro preparation may be to acquire medical supplies for a retreat group of perhaps 15 adults and 6 children. Micro preparations could include purchase of specific medicines, drugs, bandages, and other items. Containers of suitable sizes and types must be selected. The following types of survival preparation are categorized by level, based on gleanings from survivalist letters. The names are fictitious.

Level 1. Jim a 56-year old man has had experience in paneling, roofing, painting, floor tiling, furniture repair, and woodworking. He enjoys barter, but has few financial resources. Owns many tools such as garden implements, and carpenters' hand tools. Letters reflect abundant anti-Communist rhetoric but little in the way of active preparations for survival.

Level 2. Roger, a 31-year old dentist in Texas has nuclear war as a prime worry. Skills include dentistry, weapons repair, marksmanship with a high-power rifle, and care of casualties. Extensive collection of guns and ammunition. No food storage. Few supplies. Has sketchy emergency evacuation plans to two possible retreat sites, but admits possible problems with jammed roads. Knows that one of his biggest challenges is to create or find a survivalist support group in his area.

Level 3. Frank, a 50-year old Air Force retiree now works in civil defense in Kentucky. Life member of the National Rifle Association. Hunts for sport, and has 3-month food supply. Periodically visits his survival base (retreat), a large farm. Has supportive relations with long-time neighbors and nearby relatives.

Level 4. Rance and Ann, a married couple with 4 children live in central Massachusetts. Their prime worry is nuclear war, but now they feel that an internal conspiracy, planned by Trilateralists, Bilderburgers, and Rothchilds is occurring in the United States. Rance is a survival supplier, writer, and consultant, member of the National Rifle Association, experienced attack dog trainer, and skilled with such weapons as small arms, long bows and cross

bows. Maintains a 3000 volume reference library. Wife is a registered nurse. The couple have developed homesteading skills such as bee-keeping, canning, and butchering. Most of their savings have gone into survival preparations. They plan to move to a permanent retreat, buying the land, and living in a trailer temporarily. Eventually, they want to build a small earth-sheltered home with internal greenhouse and aquaculture biosystem. Would use aquaculture and hydroponics in two planned greenhouses. Have stocked a professional grade medical kit, and are assembling a dental kit. Own large quantities of preserved and dried foods and grains. Have a garden area totaling 150x150 feet, with apple and nut trees and grape vines. They have several security devices with electronic and mechanical perimeter alarms and listening equipment. They have collected several hundred burlap and polypropylene sandbags. Saving money for a ham radio transceiver, and two portable transceivers. Maintain a full workshop of tools, and have kept a cast iron wood/coal kitchen stove.

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