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BACK TO THE BUNKER

By William M. Arkin
 Sunday, June 4, 2006; Page B01

On Monday, June 19, about 4,000 government workers representing more than 50 federal agencies from the State Department to the Commodity Futures Trading Commission will say goodbye to their families and set off for dozens of classified emergency facilities stretching from the Maryland and Virginia suburbs to the foothills of the Alleghenies. They will take to the bunkers in an "evacuation" that my sources describe as the largest "continuity of government" exercise ever conducted, a drill intended to prepare the U.S. government for an event even more catastrophic than the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

The exercise is the latest manifestation of an obsession with government survival that has been a hallmark of the Bush administration since 9/11, a focus of enormous and often absurd time, money and effort that has come to echo the worst follies of the Cold War. The vast secret operation has updated the duck-and-cover scenarios of the 1950s with state-of-the-art technology -- alerts and updates delivered by pager and PDA, wireless priority service, video teleconferencing, remote backups -- to ensure that "essential" government functions continue uninterrupted should a terrorist's nuclear bomb go off in downtown Washington.

But for all the BlackBerry culture, the outcome is still old-fashioned black and white: We've spent hundreds of millions of dollars on alternate facilities, data warehouses and communications, yet no one can really foretell what would happen to the leadership and functioning of the federal government in a catastrophe.

After 9/11, The Washington Post reported that President Bush had set up a shadow government of about 100 senior civilian managers to live and work outside Washington on a rotating basis to ensure the continuity of national security. Since then, a program once focused on presidential succession and civilian control of U.S. nuclear weapons has been expanded to encompass the entire government. From the Department of Education to the Small Business Administration to the National Archives, every department and agency is now required to plan for continuity outside Washington.

Yet according to scores of documents I've obtained and interviews with half a dozen sources, there's no greater



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confidence today that essential services would be maintained in a disaster. And no one really knows how an evacuation would even be physically possible.

Moreover, since 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, the definition of what constitutes an "essential" government function has been expanded so ridiculously beyond core national security functions -- do we really need patent and trademark processing in the middle of a nuclear holocaust? -- that the term has become meaningless. The intent of the government effort may be laudable, even necessary, but a hyper-centralized approach based on the Cold War model of evacuations and bunkering makes it practically worthless.

That the continuity program is so poorly conceived, and poorly run, should come as no surprise. That's because the same Federal Emergency Management Agency that failed New Orleans after Katrina, an agency that a Senate investigating committee has pronounced "in shambles and beyond repair," is in charge of this enormous effort to plan for the U.S. government's survival.

Continuity programs began in the early 1950s, when the threat of nuclear war moved the administration of President Harry S. Truman to begin planning for emergency government functions and civil defense. Evacuation bunkers were built, and an incredibly complex and secretive shadow government program was created.

At its height, the grand era of continuity boasted the fully operational Mount Weather, a civilian bunker built along the crest of Virginia's Blue Ridge, to which most agency heads would evacuate; the Greenbrier hotel complex and bunker in West Virginia, where Congress would shelter; and Raven Rock, or Site R, a national security bunker bored into granite along the Pennsylvania-Maryland border near Camp David, where the Joint Chiefs of Staff would command a protracted nuclear war. Special communications networks were built, and evacuation and succession procedures were practiced continually.

When the Soviet Union crumbled, the program became a Cold War curiosity: Then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney ordered Raven Rock into caretaker status in 1991. The Greenbrier bunker was shuttered and a 30-year-old special access program was declassified three years later.

Then came the terrorist attacks of the mid-1990s and the looming Y2K rollover, and suddenly continuity wasn't only for nuclear war anymore. On Oct. 21, 1998, President Bill Clinton signed Presidential Decision Directive 67, "Enduring Constitutional Government and Continuity of Government Operations." No longer would only the very few elite leaders responsible for national security be covered. Instead, every single government department and agency was directed to see to it that they could resume critical functions within 12 hours of a warning, and keep their operations running at emergency facilities for up to 30 days. FEMA was put in charge of this broad new program.

On 9/11, the program was put to the test -- and failed. Not on the national security side: Vice President Cheney and others in the national security leadership were smoothly whisked away from the capital following procedures overseen by the Pentagon and the White House Military Office. But like the mass of Washingtonians, officials from other agencies found themselves virtually on their own, unsure of where to go or what to do, or whom to contact for the answers.

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