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## The False 'Emergency'

The major blunder last weekend by the National Emergency Warning Center raises questions about the reliability of the entire system of complex and expensive arrangements built up these past decades to protect the national security. The center's explanation is that a "human error" caused unauthorized declaration of a national emergency. Could similar "human error"—here or in the Soviet Union—send American or Soviet weapons into action? Those who deny such a possibility must explain why the safeguards governing instant-response weapons—which are also subject to human errors—are more trustworthy than those which failed to prevent the false emergency announcement.

Particularly dismaying is the fact that the debacle of the national alert system last Saturday showed incompetence and unpreparedness of incredible proportions at every link of this vital chain. If a fiction writer had written a story depicting in advance the actual sequence of events, most readers would have rejected the account as preposterous. Nevertheless, it all happened.

The beginning of this amazing and chilling episode was the error that caused the transmission of the actual alert announcement in place of the scheduled routine test. It took an extraordinary number of minutes for the Warning Center to wake up to the blunder. Then something even more disturbing happened. It turned out that the center was not instantly prepared to cancel the warning but had to scrounge about frantically to find the correct code word to authenticate the cancellation. Forty minutes went by between the beginning and end of this unbelievable sequence of errors—enough time for a ballistic missile to travel over 10,000 miles.

The gross unpreparedness and confusion at the receiving end—in many radio and television station studios—was equally illuminating. Some stations never even got the message for reasons that varied from jammed paper in a news ticker to a clerk's failure to look at the ticker until the whole incident was already history. At the other extreme was the intelligent reaction of those broadcasters who checked the emergency message with an alternative warning source and learned that no Presidential alert had been issued. A comprehensive study of how all the nation's broadcasters reacted to this unprecedented situation would be very useful.

One need not be a professional systems analyst to understand the sources of this breakdown of command and control. Many years have gone by since this emergency warning system was set up. Happily, it has never had to be used in earnest. Over the years, therefore, its potential use must have seemed ever less real to all those concerned—whether in the Warning Center itself or in the broadcasting industry. Some of those involved may well have come to view it all as a Kafkaesque joke, and to regard the need to tend this system as a source of hateful boredom.

Retaliatory weapons systems that wait years without being employed are also subject to the build-up of similar tensions and to the hazards of human error. Thus the investigation of what went wrong last Saturday has implications and usefulness going far beyond the warning system itself.