

That National

Examiner News Services

A teletype operator at the National Warning Center accidentally flashed an authenticated national emergency alert message yesterday morning to radio and television stations across the nation.

Some stations, fearing the worst — a nuclear attack — relayed the message to the public and then went off the air.

Others, including many stations in San Francisco, were skeptical and after checking conventional sources did nothing.

Still others, like KNBR in San Francisco, the key Northern California station in the event of a civil defense emergency, were unaware anything was happening almost until it was all over.

But it wasn't over for a remarkably long time — 40

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Emergency Alert -

MESSAGE AUTHENTICATOR: HATEFULNESS/HATEFULNESS
THIS IS AN EMERGENCY ACTION NOTIFICATION (EAN) DIRECTED BY THE PRESIDENT. NORMAL BROADCASTING WILL CEASE IMMEDIATELY. ALL STATIONS WILL BROADCAST EAN MESSAGE ONE PRECEDED BY THE ATTENTION SIGNAL, PER FCC RULES. ONLY STATIONS HOLDING NDEA MAY STAY ON AIR IN ACCORD WITH THEIR STATE EBS PLAN. BROADCAST EAN MESSAGE ONE.
MESSAGE AUTHENTICATOR: HATEFULNESS/HATEFULNESS
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minutes — as technicians at the warning facility near Colorado Springs scrambled for

the deactivating code word and didn't get it right until the third try.

"It was just a simple human error," said Louis Smoyer, director of the facility at the North American Air Defense Command, at Cheyenne Mountain, Colo.

He said the operator, W. S. Eberhardt, a 15 year civilian veteran at the center, somehow used the wrong tape during a regularly scheduled weekly test of the defense warning system.

The perforated tape acti-

vated teletypes which broke directly into the broadcast news wires of the Associated Press and United Press International. The wires go to the 2500 stations that participate in the defense warning program, which used to be known as Conelrad.

It came at 6:33 a.m. (PST) and finally was canceled at 7:13 a.m. after two attempts to lift it failed because they carried improper codes.

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- SNAFU

Except that it was born in error, all characteristics of the alert, designed to warn of a missile or bombing assaults on North America, were authentic. It also carried the code word "hatefulness," the authenticating word specified for Feb. 20 in manuals stations are required to consult before broadcasting the alert and

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leaving the air.

Sealed envelopes provided by the Federal Communications Commission contain a list of code words, one for each day during a three-month period.

By checking the code word on the message against that on the list for Saturday, Feb. 20, broadcasters supposedly were able to verify the authenticity of the message.

But those who ignored the alert and continued their normal programs said they either just didn't believe it, wanted to check further or failed to see it on the wire.

In Washington, aides said Defense Secretary Melvin Laird ordered an immediate investigation of the incident.

Under the system, the President is the only one who can order, or cancel, the alert. But a check with the White House press office when the original erroneous signal was flashed drew the surprised response from an aide that "nothing has come from the President."

The Strategic Air Command also ignored the alert and did not dispatch attack aircraft after it was received.

"All we know is what we read on your wire, that alert was strictly for radio stations," Maj. Bill Corbin, director of information for SAC at its Omaha headquarters, told a News Service reporter.

No Comment

Asked later to explain under what circumstances the President would declare a national emergency to activate the alert system, a White House aide would not comment.

At Cheyenne Mountain, director Smoyer was at a loss for words.

"All I can say is that it inadvertently happened," Smoyer said. "It was just a matter of putting the tape through."

Cheyenne Mountain is underground headquarters for the North American Air Defense Command, but officials said Army personnel were involved because the warning center is run by the Army Strategic Communications Command.

A spokesman for the Amer-

ican Telephone & Telegraph Co. at Colorado Springs, which provided the center's system and leases the news wires, said it was the first nationwide failure of the program since it was installed more than 10 years ago.

On Aug. 17, 1968, however, a piece of monitoring equipment failed and the routine emergency action message failed to move on the wires as scheduled.

The AT&T spokesman said the failure was detected immediately and the defective part replaced in "a matter of minutes."

Here, in general, is how the incident developed:

At 6:33 a.m. the message

carrying the authenticating word "HATEFULNESS" appeared on the wire.

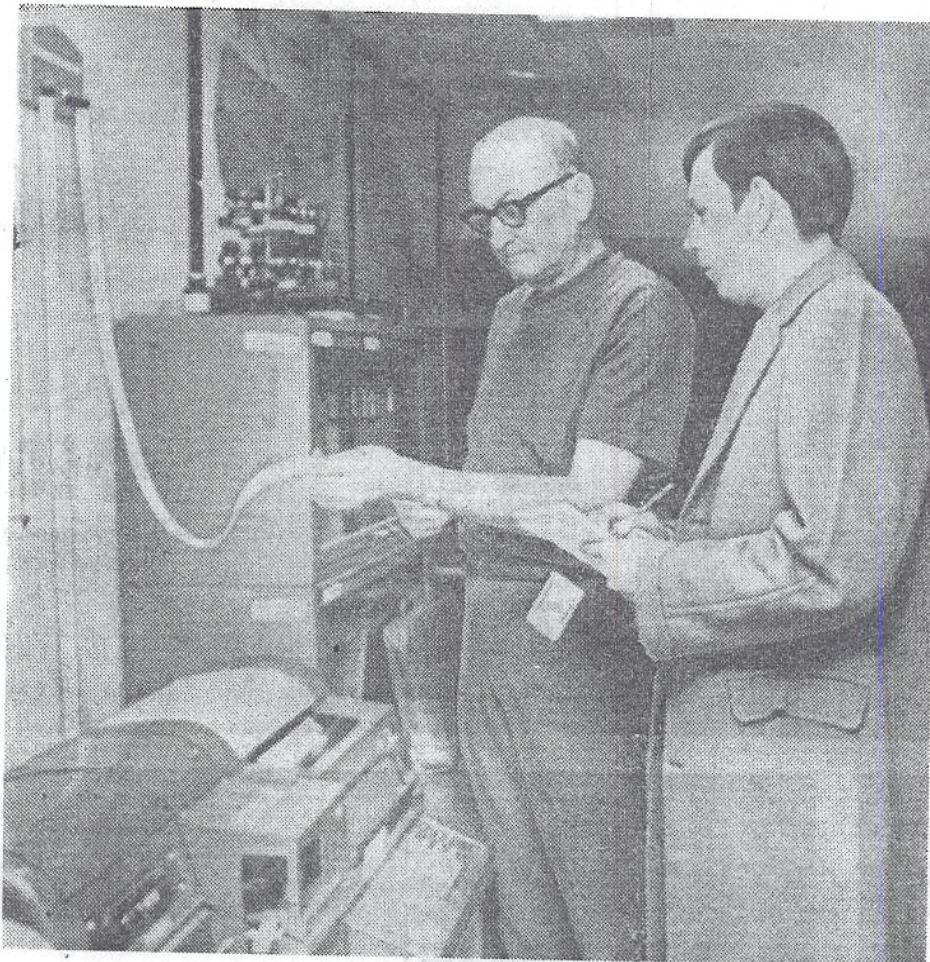
It said, "This is an emergency action notification EAN directed by the President" and went on to tell station to halt broadcasting after telling their listeners the emergency channel to tune for further information.

In the minutes that followed, stations started leaving the air. Some continued broadcasting, in accord with their role in the Emergency Broadcast System that constitutes one of the Civil Defense Information networks.

Other stations waited for confirmation of the emergency via another wire linking the White House with the four commercial broadcasting networks and their affiliates.

Finally, at 6:43 a.m. PST, United Press International and the Associated Press, whose wires had been preempted for transmission of the original message, received word from the Civil Defense Agency that the alert was erroneous. The two wire services advised stations immediately to resume normal programming.

At 6:51 the warning center again took the wires and told stations to ignore the alert. But the message didn't contain the code word "impish," which was specified for can-



LOUIS SMOYER PUTS ERRONEOUS TAPE BACK ON HOOK
Warning center chief shows newsman the wrongly used recording

—AP Photo

cellation.

At 6:59 a.m., the warning center again tried to lift the alert, but this time used "hatefulness," the alert code word. Finally at 7:13 a.m., a message using the proper code word was transmitted.

Neither the Federal Communications Commission nor the Civil Defense Agency

would venture a guess as to how many actually left the air.

But the mistake infuriated many broadcast industry officials and prompted some to question whether the emergency system was reliable.

"This made us just angry as hell," said a spokesman for radio station KIXL in Dallas. "You can't play ar-

ound with things like this."

A station manager in Milwaukee wanted to know "who got their heads screwed on backwards."

Another in Minneapolis said he was "ready to pdt on my dnifirm" and, across the river in St. Pahl, a manager said he was "about to tell the engineer to unplug everything and go home."