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All Americans should welcome alerts from the president

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ADOBE

This Wednesday, millions of cell phones will receive a "Presidential alert" straight from the White House. If your phone is on, and in range of a cell tower at 2:18 p.m., it will sound a jarring tone, vibrate, and display an on-screen message. Only the president can initiate such a nationwide alert, and there is no way to opt-out.

It will be the first test of the Emergency Alert System's new national wireless capability, but the notion of receiving any compulsory message from the president has already

sparked controversy and even resistance. That skepticism represents an alarming erosion of public trust in an essential government function that should concern everyone.

While much of the hostility seems rooted in a broader mistrust of President Trump, it's understandable that many Americans largely seem confused about the purpose of such a system. In a time when news is shared almost instantaneously, it is hard to imagine a situation requiring a dedicated channel for use exclusively by the president.

But that confusion is also a symptom of our fading memory of the Cold War, rather than a perilous expansion of presidential power. As far back as the 1960s, the president's ability to alert the nation via an omnipresent network was seen as a crucial part of confronting the only national emergency that mattered: nuclear war.

For 50 years, that threat has driven American defense planning, including the creation of a robust national alert system. Examining the coming test in its historical context might not make it less disconcerting, but it does clarify the stakes.

The story of America's national alert system begins in the first days of the Cold War, under a program named CONELRAD. Short for "control of electromagnetic radiation," CONELRAD was launched in 1951, and was the earliest attempt at coordinating civil communications in the event of a Soviet attack.

Under the system, once invading bombers were detected, every civilian radio and television broadcasting station would be required to cease transmitting — save for two AM frequencies, on which civil defense instructions would be broadcast for a short time.

The main idea behind CONELRAD was that "going silent" would deny attacking bombers civilian radio beacons to "home in on" as they approached American cities. Important, too, would be the information provided over the civil defense frequencies: in the 1950s, nuclear weapons and their effects remained largely a public mystery. Providing clear, authoritative instructions in the event of war could save many lives.

But the program ultimately came under fire as its ad-hoc nature often resulted in communications breakdowns, and in case of a real emergency, it seemed unlikely that a majority of Americans would be reached. It was also unclear exactly which authority would be providing instructions over those civil defense channels—a troubling question during what would undoubtedly be a time of widespread confusion, misinformation, and rumor.

By the 1960s, the US-Soviet standoff had intensified, largely owing to the debut of long-range missiles, which could deliver nuclear warheads to American cities in as little as 40 minutes. The White House grappled with this development, knowing well that in the event of war, the president would have only minutes to react. The Kennedy administration replaced CONELRAD and launched the Emergency Broadcast System in 1963 as better system to send a snap message to the nation.

Explicitly imagined as a way for the president to "reassure and give direction to the populace regarding survival and recovery of the nation," the new system was more reliable from a technical standpoint, and added credibility by providing a single point of authority in the White House. The logic was that, in a moment of great panic and confusion, only the president had the credibility needed to compel the public into taking emergency measures. The alert — not much more elaborate than "the country is under attack; find shelter immediately" — was to be carried on radio and television stations, which through the end of the century remained the surest method of quickly reaching a majority of Americans.

Most Americans are probably familiar with the EBS, which operated until 1997 and continues today as the Emergency Alert System, for its role in sending local severe weather or missing children alerts. But it actually wasn't until the late 1970s that local authorities began to make common use of those secondary functions—the primary purpose of the EBS was always to rapidly furnish a message directly from the President in case of nuclear attack.

When the Cold War ended, much of the aging civil defense infrastructure was left to decay. As air raid sirens and fallout shelters became defunct, society, too, seemed to leave behind its fears of nuclear war. But unfortunately, the threats that terrified us in the Cold War have only continued, as thousands of nuclear weapons in Russia, China, and now North Korea stand ready to strike American cities within the hour.

In that context, the wireless alert that Americans will receive represents not an issue of new technology and executive overreach, but rather the uncomfortable, decades-old problem of living with — and planning for — the possibility of sudden armageddon.

Similarly, public resistance to the test can be traced to a breakdown in the original logic of the system. The original broadcasting system was built on a bedrock of presidential credibility, which in the 1960s seemed both unassailable and vital to the larger project of federal civil defense. Today, after decades of political polarization and countless recent public scandals, presidential credibility is at best a partisan resource, and at worst a mirage.

Lawmakers should view the test, and the backlash against it, as a measure of our preparedness for nuclear disaster. When something as basic as a national alert system is ignored — or resisted — by a large portion of the public, steps must be taken to restore its credibility.

Modernizing civil defense systems is a worthy goal, and one our government must pursue until it is ready to do the much harder, but extremely necessary work of ridding the world of nuclear weapons.

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