

10-1-1982

The Underground Pentagon: An Insider's View of America's Doomsday Center

In the Public Interest

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/itpi>



Part of the [Military, War, and Peace Commons](#), and the [National Security Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

In the Public Interest, *The Underground Pentagon: An Insider's View of America's Doomsday Center*, 3 Buff. Envtl. L.J. 41 (1982).

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/itpi/vol3/iss1/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in In the Public Interest by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.

THE UNDERGROUND PENTAGON

An insider's view of America's Doomsday Center

In 1956 and 1957, Dr. Allan L. Canfield, former Assistant Dean at the State University of New York at Buffalo Law School, served in the United States Army as a cryptographer. He was stationed at Fort Ritchie, Maryland, the above-ground base which controls the so-called "Underground Pentagon," a below-ground facility not far from Camp David, Maryland.

Dr. Canfield was asked to share some of his perspectives about the facility, its ostensible purposes, and some related questions. Needless to say, his perspectives have changed in the quarter century since his tour of duty, and, of course, the uses and purposes of the facility may have changed.



QUESTION: Dr. Canfield, how did you happen to get involved with the "Underground Pentagon"?

ANSWER: In 1956, I volunteered to enter the United States Army after two years of college. At that time, volunteers were told that they would be given their choice of schooling in the Army. I asked to be trained in languages at the Presidio in California or, alternatively, in radio broadcasting. The Army, however, decided that it needed me in cryptography, a fairly technical field and one which, so we were told, required some ability beyond the norm. It was this training that eventually determined that I would go to the "Underground Pentagon." Although I did not get the training I had requested, I entered a most interesting field of activity.

QUESTION: You said that you eventually went to the "Underground Pentagon." Where were you prior to that experience?

ANSWER: After I received my basic training in South Carolina, I acquired my cryptographic training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. Then the Army, in its inimitable style, sent me several thousand miles from my "theatre of choice." Although I had requested to go to Europe or Japan—places where I could take my family—the Army sent me to Korea, a country which had just suffered the severity of war. Yet it was a country which had a very special cultural quality; one which I appreciate even today. In addition, the experience made me keenly aware of the differences between the Orient and the United States. I learned to evaluate my own

Western cultural experiences by living in Korea.

Korea, at that time, was not entirely free of the possibility of further war. It was divided, there were frequent excursions of combat across the Demilitarized Zone, and there were continuous alerts. My work as a cryptographer was in the thick of the situation. I was stuck on a mountainside, in a semi-bivouac situation. Being a cryptographer, I had the responsibility to encode and decode messages affecting our military compound and the Republic of Korea Attachment across the valley. It was fascinating, though not at all as I had imagined it would be, and I felt a sense of responsibility given the type of work.

QUESTION: That type of work is generally classified as secret, is it not?

ANSWER: Yes, it is secret—top secret, or some version of that, depending on the sensitivity of the particular operation.

QUESTION: Can you describe any of your activities as a cryptographer?

ANSWER: I can dispel some myths. Cryptographers have been thought of as a special hybrid of an Einstein crossbred with a Sherlock Holmes. There have been several books dealing with this rather arcane science or craft, many of which attribute the military success of the United States over Japan and Germany to such geniuses who could unlock coding secrets. Some of these stories must be true, but, in the main, cryptographers use several types of equipment, some of which is fairly rudimentary.

The field equipment in Korea, as you can imagine, could not be too sophisticated, since it had to be dragged through rice paddies, dirt, rain, and snow. Yet, it had to be maintained by the operator or other similarly trained serviceman. Though the equipment was rudimentary, at least when compared to what I found in the "Underground Pentagon," it served its purpose. Given the proper attention, it also defied code-breaking by the enemy. You may recall that a civilian from Niagara Falls was recently charged with selling similar equipment to the Soviet Union during the Korean War. In short, the equipment was necessary to the survival of the fighting forces in Korea.

QUESTION: After your time in Korea, where did you go?

THE UNDERGROUND PENTAGON

"It was said . . . that there was sufficient food and water there, including an underground lake, for the president, his cabinet, and major officers of the fighting and operational forces to last for two years."

ANSWER: Again, when asked where I would like to go after Korea, I told the Army that I would like to be stationed near Buffalo, New York, where I could rejoin my family. The Army got a bit closer this time; they sent me to Fort Ritchie, Maryland—but not until some curious things happened.

For example, when I returned to the United States through Fort Lewis, Seattle, I waited with the other soldiers to get my orders. It was "hurry up and wait," as the Army saying goes. I waited beyond the time when all the others had received their orders, and then I was given the order to go to Fort Ritchie, a place about which there was no rumor or knowledge. Army bases usually have a demeanor that soldiers either like or dislike. Fort Ritchie seemed to have little known reputation at all. The sergeants did not seem to know where it was or what it was about. Someone said it was top secret, which accounted for the relative lack of information about it.

QUESTION: Where exactly are Fort Ritchie and the "Underground Pentagon"?

ANSWER: They are about fifty miles north of Washington, D.C., between Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and Hagerstown, Maryland. Camp David, hidden away in the Catoctin Mountains, lies over the hills about six or seven miles away. The Catoctin Mountains are covered with the typical North American trees and foliage, but, if one were to look carefully, he or she could see the holes in the mountains which lead into the facility. Such persons could not get close to the facility as it was amply protected.

Interestingly, although no one back in Fort Lewis, Washington, had known much about the facility, the local citizens knew about its existence and purposes. Once, while

hitchhiking to Buffalo, a local farmer picked me up. Not knowing that I worked in the "Underground Pentagon," he explained to me quite accurately what went on inside. He, too, called it the "Underground Pentagon," a name which I think was unofficial although it was also used by the Army.

QUESTION: Can you describe the facility and its inner-workings?

ANSWER: Yes, I think I can without bridging my conscience. It is, after all, a quarter of a century later, and there is nothing I could say, I believe, which would reveal any secrets to the Soviets or other imagined enemies of the United States. Paradoxically, they may know more about it than the United States citizenry.

To envision it, you should imagine a building complex quite larger than any on the campuses of this university, which is nestled inside a blasted-out rock cavern. One entered the cavern by bus and, after careful inspection, went up an elevator to the floor where he or she worked.

It was said, though I never personally verified it, that there was sufficient food and water there, including an underground lake, for the president, his cabinet, and major officers of the fighting and operational forces to last for two years. This might have been the case—much of the building was off-limits to me, even though I had the highest security clearance available at the time. I did see other floors with space, such as offices and mess halls, for other persons.

QUESTION: How could the president possibly operate from there?

ANSWER: First, the building was built to withstand an atomic blast. It had thick metallic doors, which could be shut at the tunnel entrances. It also had springlike devices built into the structure to help it withstand the tremors from the blast. Further, it had links with the outside through communicative technology. We could communicate nearly anywhere in the world at any given time through several types of channels. The place seemed to me to be at the cutting edge of the communicative-cybernetic age, as we now term it.

The president, as commander in chief, could operate from this facility, although one has to wonder whether there would be anything left above ground after an atomic exchange between the superpowers. The power of the bombs has significantly increased since that time.

QUESTION: When was the "Underground Pentagon" built?

THE UNDERGROUND PENTAGON

ANSWER: The facility was apparently built during the period when Americans were being encouraged to go underground. Governor Rockefeller, for example, asked Americans to build bomb shelters to protect themselves. Many Americans did build them, perhaps thinking that, if they could survive the blast, they might continue a worthy life. Only recently do we know that the effects of atomic blasts far outlast their immediate devastation because of the radiation effects which not only are extremely lethal to existing life but also may enter the genetic stream of our children.

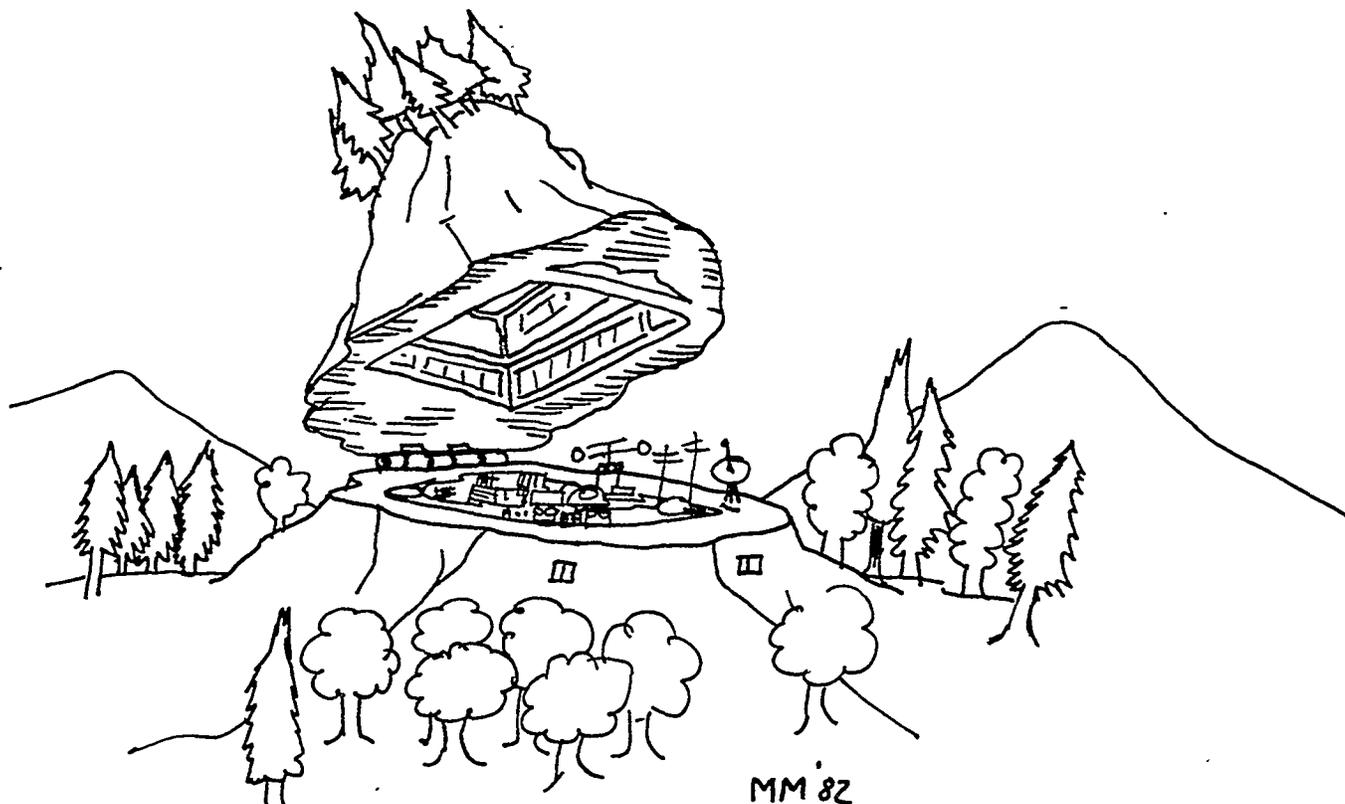
Recently, a Canadian television documentary indicated that a single Trident nuclear missile has many times the power of either of the bombs that the United States dropped on Nagasaki or Hiroshima. It was said by way of comparison that, if the power of the atomic blasts over Japan represented one second in time, the power of a single Trident missile would represent seventeen minutes. I do not know how many Tridents we have, but, as an everyday citizen, I shudder at the enormous destructive power we have in just one missile.

It was the arms build-up mentality of the fifties and earlier that led to the construction of the "Underground Pentagon." Incidentally, according to former Pentagon liai-

son Daniel Ellsberg, the Soviet Union could not possibly have attacked the United States with a nuclear weapon in the mid-sixties, since their technology was incapable of such an attack. President Kennedy, nevertheless, goaded the American public into thinking that the Soviet Union held a nuclear advantage over the United States. Actually, says Ellsberg, the United States had a far greater nuclear capability than Russia, and there was no necessity for a nuclear build-up on our part.

Similarly, President Reagan recently said on television that he had access to information, about which few people knew, strongly indicating that we need to build up our military and our nuclear capability. It is toward the bigger and better bomb and the greater military that President Reagan is headed. I would not be surprised, therefore, to find that other "Underground Pentagons" are being built or are currently in use even when we know that they would be relatively useless in a nuclear war with today's weapons. There is something disturbing about the military build-up mentality which overlooks this fact as well as other facts and political realities.

The devastation of the "cosmic Hiroshima" type bomb—the superbomb of today—would seem to make the value



THE UNDERGROUND PENTAGON

of an "Underground Pentagon" no greater than that of a cave. If one were to walk away from a cave after the blast, just where and to what would he or she be walking? What would be humanity's quest then? In short, the nuclear world in which we live today, I believe, makes such facilities obsolete, assuming they ever had any use.

Yet, the military build-up inexorably continues. For example, a national magazine recently reported the findings of a study by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, which showed a definite shift of scientific and technological resources toward the military. Something like sixty percent of the federal government's research and development money will be spent on military programs—a figure that is up by more than 45 percent since 1980. During the same period, civilian research and development funds dropped by about 16 percent.

Aren't we duping ourselves in thinking that a military build-up and more nuclear bombs will solve our international problems? Apparently the inexorability of the military build-up is due not to realism but rather to a type of military mind that feels more comfortable when the "big stick" can be used. So, again, I would not be surprised if there are other, newer underground facilities being built, despite their relative uselessness in the age of nuclear weapons.

For one thing, the United States cannot really control the weapons it creates. Dr. James Muller, founder of International Physicians for Prevention of Nuclear War, has pointed out that a nuclear war might result from accident alone or it might result from conventional wars. He indicated that the anti-missile detection system employed by the North American Defense Command failed more than 150 times during one eighteen-month period. On one occasion, a technician loaded the wrong training tape into a computer and the Command, thinking that a Soviet attack was imminent, launched a B-52 counterattack readiness alert which lasted for six minutes.

Further, what will happen as nuclear weapons proliferate? Several less-than-stable Third World countries are reportedly close to developing nuclear capability. In short, the United States can no longer exercise any kind of control over the nuclear power of our military or that of another country.

The prize-winning writer, Robert Holmes, has advocated unilateral nuclear disarmament on the thesis that no power wishes to inherit a devastated earth. The same thesis applies to "Underground Pentagons" and civil defense generally. When our leaders leave their underground sanctuary after a nuclear holocaust, will there be a world to which they can return?

QUESTION: After twenty-five years away from the work at the "Underground Pentagon," do you have additional thoughts about the experience?

ANSWER: Although I thoroughly enjoyed working as a cryptographer—it was intriguing—it was not a field which I could follow in civilian life. In a practical sense, then, I should make it clear that I do not know what goes on in the "Underground Pentagon" today—or whether it still exists as I knew it.

In a symbolic sense, I have many thoughts. I now know that such facilities are quite useless given the nuclear age. Yet, I also know that the mentality which led to the building of such a structure still exists. There are still the war-crazed generals as typified by the role played by George C. Scott in the movie, *Taps*. But there are also the Daniel Ellsbergs. Both groups operate under a phenomenon which did not exist fifty years ago. I call it the "LABB effect" or the "Life After the Big Bomb" effect.

Perhaps the George C. Scotts of the movies will want to go underground with a big stick as a way of protecting humankind and its progeny. The Ellsberg group wants to try other methods, such as unilateral disarmament or further SALT plans, hoping that there may be international therapy in a newer, alternative approach. Such people believe that the warrior mentality has solved very few problems. They believe, as I do, that the president has the job of making us feel strong as a nation without resorting to guns and bombs. In this age, resorting to military solutions may mark the end for us and our children. As Dr. Muller has put it:

We are moving inexorably and unwittingly toward a finale similar to that so powerfully described in *Hamlet*. At the play's conclusion, Fortinbras enters and finds the recently slain Hamlet, Laertes, and the King and Queen of Denmark. Hamlet's friend, Horatio, then explains how such a disaster occurred:

*"And let me speak to th' yet unknowing world
How these things came about. So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
Fall'n on th' inventors' heads."*

We are now the inventors. We have set the stage for "accidental judgements," "forced cause," and "purposes mistook" to lead us, not to a series of palace murders but to an event of unimaginable hor-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 48

THE UNDERGROUND PENTAGON

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 44

ror in which millions of innocent people will die agonizing deaths. Physicians who survive will be unable to provide even minimal pain relief for most of the dying.

That is what the "Underground Pentagon" symbolizes for me today. I hope my children and yours live to see the day when our leaders, and we, come to the light of day, away from the caves, with courage to try to develop a new social order, even in the face of those who say it cannot be done. We desperately need to try: Is it impossible to turn swords into plowshares? 
