Shelters dangerous

To the Editor:

It isn’t clear to me exactly what the purpose was of the feature article entitled: “In case of emergency…” When I started the article, I expected that the author might raise some of the rather long-standing arguments against fallout shelters. I quickly realized that it was nothing but a cheerful description of where we could expect to huddle awaiting our destruction in the event of a nuclear attack.

Does The Tech truly believe that these shelters would serve any real survival purpose in the event of a nuclear attack? One of the major criticisms of fallout shelters was presented the last time they were in vogue in the US, and recently in the UK, where the government issued a pamphlet entitled “Protect and Survive.” It stated simply, that fallout shelters give the populace a false feeling of invulnerability, making escalation of the arms race and of general international tensions more acceptable. Does anyone in their right minds really expect that a shelter in a basement, constructed of some concrete blocks, and stockpiled with limited (for most, what they could grab in the few minutes before attack) rations, could ever adequately safeguard anyone? Especially in the Boston area, where one could expect a truly major attack?

For that matter, would McCormick save us, even if we were all on the guest list? Your article notes that the fallout shelters are no longer stocked with food and water, although it is heartening to know that the Director of Nuclear Civil Protection expects that the budget for stocking shelters may be boosted during the Reagan Administration. The commonly available literature devotes little attention to a crucial question that people who are relieved by the existence of fallout shelters on campus should consider, namely, what do we do after? This isn’t to say that no thought has been given to the problem.

New Statesman, a British weekly, revealed several official British documents in October of last year. They pointed to, among other things, internment of government critics in the event of national emergency, and total military control of major transportation routes and of food and health services. One might wonder if similar planning has gone on in the US. In fact, we know from documents received under the Freedom of Information act that the US government maintains a list of persons to be detained in case of “national emergency,” who might be expected to criticize government action or fund such criticism.

Whether The Tech may be loath to include the above sort of commentary on civil defense policy in its pages, or whether it did not provide its writer with enough suggestions and guidance isn’t really what bothers me. The Tech does have a responsibility, as a self-proclaimed “responsible” newspaper, to look behind the surface of issues such as this, and present true options for the MIT community to consider, and it now has a chance, under new leadership, to do so.

Bill Hoffman

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