

# A conversation with Nick McCamley on 29 November 2013

---

## Participants

- Nick McCamley—author of *Cold War Secret Nuclear Bunkers*
- Nick Beckstead—Research Fellow, Future of Humanity Institute; Board of Trustees, Centre for Effective Altruism

## Summary

**Purpose of the call:** I organized this call as part of a shallow investigation of investing in bunkers or refuges in order to help humanity to survive extreme catastrophes.

**Why this person:** Nick McCamley is the author of *Cold War Secret Nuclear Bunkers*. His research has focused on bunkers in the UK, and has primarily been historical.

We discussed UK government bunkers in history and today. The UK created many bunkers during and before the Cold War, but they were decommissioned and sold off from 1998 to 2004. The bunkers kept at most three months of food at their peak. The UK government believed that in the event of a nuclear war, most of the population would perish, but a substantial portion would survive. McCamley believes the UK now primarily uses many dispersed, mobile communication centers instead of bunkers. McCamley believes the UK would be very underprepared if there were a nuclear war today, and is much less prepared than Switzerland, which has fallout shelters for the entire population. However, he believes that creating bunkers that would be adequate in the event of a nuclear war would be prohibitively expensive.

## Could bunkers or refuges help humanity to survive and recover from an extreme, species-threatening catastrophe?

### Did the people making bunkers worry about human extinction? Did they prepare for that possibility?

The UK government believed that most of the population would perish in a nuclear war, but that humanity would survive.

### Did they plan for nuclear winter?

McCamley expects they did plan for it, but he hasn't come across plans in government documents.

## What kind of bunkers or refuges do we have now? Would it help to have more or better ones?

### How many bunkers were there at the peak?

UK government bunkers included:

1. One central government bunker (war cabinet, chiefs of staff, and representatives from important government departments)
2. 14 regional government bunkers (where some geographically large regions had two bunkers)
3. About 14 bunkers for water suppliers
4. A small number of hardened, but not radiation-proof, bunkers for electrical suppliers
5. About 14 bunkers for railroads

In addition, the local authorities were required to construct protected (i.e. moderately blast and radiation proof) bunkers for their administrative staff. All the county and District councils initially did so, generally constructing the bunkers below Town Halls or Civic Centres. They were also obliged to construct a second, less sophisticated, standby emergency headquarters. Many of these still survive, post-Cold War, used as peacetime emergency contingency centres.

**Comment [NB1]:** Updated section

For the general population, the UK government delegated responsibility to regional governments, which delegated responsibility to county governments, to town councils. They had plans for individuals to stay in public buildings and had food storage. In McCamley's opinion, the preparations for the general population would have been very inadequate in the event of a nuclear war.

### Were the bunkers built to withstand biological attacks?

From the 1980s, defense against biological warfare became increasingly important in comparison with defense against nuclear warfare. For example, in 1986 the cruise missile command center and Greenham Common was not particularly hardened against radiation or blasts, but it had very sophisticated chemical and biological filtration systems.

### What kind of food preparations did the bunkers have?

They kept a couple of months at most. At its peak, the central government bunker kept three months of food. After this point, they expected that radiation levels would be sufficiently low that people could safely go outside and the UK could import food. Governments assumed there was no need to plan for an attack following falls in radiation levels because they assumed that all nuclear weapons would be used in one strike.

Providing food for the general population was seen as a primary purpose of the government following a nuclear war, in part because they believed that food insecurity would cause instability. There were substantial food reserves for the general population, though McCamley didn't know how much local governments were required to keep.

Government control bunkers were tasked with ensuring a constant food supply from abroad to feed the population at large and arranging for vital fuel supplies from abroad, which would be coordinated via surviving communications systems.

### **Were there plans to defend bunkers if unauthorized citizens wanted to use them?**

There was a military contingent in all bunkers, and they would have been tasked with controlling the civilian population.

### **Would people have been able to get into bunkers in time?**

At different periods, the government had different plans for getting into bunkers in time.

During some periods, central government and regional governments planned to go into bunkers when war had a high enough probability. In others, they planned not go into bunkers until the last moment. In still other times, they planned to send half of the government into bunkers when war had a high enough probability and the other half at the last moment. In all cases, they were careful to keep evacuation plans secret because even the most hardened bunkers could not survive nearby nuclear strikes.

### **What kind of bunkers or other preparations do we have today?**

From 1998 to 2004, the UK government decommissioned and sold off their bunkers. McCamley knows of no evidence that bunkers exist today in the UK, but the government is secretive about this information. The primary purpose of the bunkers was to maintain communications for the sake of continuity of government in the event of a nuclear war. McCamley believes that bunkers are not used today, but instead there are dispersed, mobile communication centers. However, some of the standby emergency headquarters on the county level are still used today.

### **What, if anything, is being done to improve bunkers or refuges? How could a philanthropist or government help?**

### **Should we have more bunkers than we do, less, or do we have about the right amount?**

In McCamley's opinion, the UK government would not be adequately equipped for a nuclear conflict today. He believes it would be prohibitively expensive to create bunkers that would provide adequate protection in the event of a nuclear war.

Most of the bunkers still exist in private hands, often used for internet server farms or private document storage. They could be requisitioned if necessary.

### **Other notes**

Since the 1970s, Switzerland has required new residential construction to include fallout shelters.

## Learning more

### Who else could I speak to in order to learn more about this?

Steve Fox, author of e-book *To Burlington and Beyond*

### What could I read?

Campbell, Duncan. *War Plan UK*. Burnett Books, 1982. ISBN 978-0091506711

Catford, Nick. *Burlington*. Folly Books, 2012. ISBN 978-0956440563

Steve Fox's website, <http://burlingtonandbeyond.co.uk/>

Read about the history of the US Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA)

## Appendix: Questions I sent to Nick McCamley

I sent the following questions to Nick McCamley before our meeting

1. Could bunkers or refuges help humanity to survive and recover from an extreme, species-threatening catastrophe?
2. What kind of bunkers or refuges do we have now? Would it help to have more or better ones?
3. What, if anything, is being done to improve bunkers or refuges? How could a philanthropist or government help?
4. Who else could I speak to in order to learn more about this?