# CONTENTS

List of Illustrations  ix  
Preface: A Vulnerable World  xi  
Acknowledgments  xxi  

Introduction: The New Normalcy  1  

**PART I. CRISIS GOVERNMENT IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II**  
1 Vital Systems  39  
2 Emergency Government  84  

**PART II. DEMOBILIZATION AND REMOBILIZATION**  
3 Vulnerability  139  
4 Preparedness  182  

**PART III. COLD WAR PLANNING FOR NATIONAL SURVIVAL**  
5 Enacting Catastrophe  247  
6 Survival Resources  291  

Epilogue: From Nuclear War to Climate Change  329  

Notes  341  
Bibliography  399  
Index  417
INTRODUCTION

The New Normalcy

During the past twenty years we have substituted for the normalcy of the halcyon 1920s an almost unbroken series of emergencies: depression, defense, war, inflation, cold war. Indeed, emergency appears to have become the new kind of normalcy. National emergencies tend to favor improvisation by government. Yet with all our improvising, our “putting out of fires,” our apparent activation by events instead of deliberate activation of events, we have emerged with a discernible pattern of domestic and foreign policy and, most important, with an acceptance of the idea that government should consciously plan a strategy for anticipating and meeting domestic and foreign emergencies at the operational level.

—JAMES FESLER, SPEECH TO THE INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE OF THE ARMED FORCES, SEPTEMBER 4, 1952

In 1954, the United States’ Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF) published a massive multivolume tome, *Emergency Management of the National Economy.* The ICAF volumes collected a series of lectures that had been delivered to military officers at the college, as well as a range of government documents that addressed ICAF’s main concern: managing industrial mobilization for war. The fourth volume, dedicated to *Principles of Administration*, reproduced a lecture by political scientist James Fesler, a veteran of government reform during the New Deal and of mobilization planning during World War II. Looking back on the previous two tumultuous decades, Fesler observed that the United States had emerged from an “unbroken
series of emergencies”—“depression, defense, war, inflation, cold war”—with a “discernible pattern” of emergency government. Its hallmark was a new norm: “government should consciously plan a strategy for anticipating and meeting domestic and foreign emergencies at the operational level.” In the “new kind of normalcy” Fesler described, emergency government was no longer confined to exceptional situations. Rather, ongoing emergency preparedness had become a part of governmental routine.

More than six decades later, it is taken for granted that government bears responsibility for continuously anticipating and preparing for emergencies. This assumption has been evident in efforts to assign blame and bolster readiness following disasters such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. It is noteworthy, then, that in 1952, when Fesler gave his lecture, this governmental norm was neither established nor taken for granted. Rather, it was new and required explicit statement and elaboration.

It is also noteworthy that Fesler’s discussion addressed a set of problems and institutional contexts that seem distant from our contemporary understandings of emergency management. Today, government offices tasked with managing emergencies are concerned with preparedness for events such as natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and terrorist attacks, as well as with response and recovery in the aftermath of such events. But in 1952, the object of emergency management was the national economy, and its central aim was military-industrial mobilization—marshaling raw materials, industrial facilities, and manpower to build the tanks, planes, munitions, and other supplies necessary for total war. In this sense, Fesler’s speech points us to the specificity of the historical conjuncture during which new norms for managing emergencies were first articulated in the United States and were connected to forms of expert knowledge, administrative practices, and legal mechanisms. The topics addressed in Emergency Management of the National Economy suggest some of the issues that, in this now unfamiliar landscape, were initially clustered around emergency government: resource planning, economic controls, internal security, economic intelligence, air targeting, government reorganization, domestic vulnerability, and non-military defense. And the government offices, commissions, and agencies whose work was either collected or discussed in the ICAF volumes—most long-since dissolved, and many virtually forgotten—provide a map of the institutional settings in which emergency government was addressed at this time. Among these were committees working on government reform and resource management during the New Deal; wartime and postwar
mobilization planning offices; air-targeting and strategic intelligence units in the military; and offices of civil defense and domestic preparedness of the early Cold War.\textsuperscript{3}

If *Emergency Management of the National Economy* situates the history of American emergency government in relation to economic management and military-industrial mobilization during the Great Depression and World War II, it also marks a point of inflection. In the early 1950s, emergency government was already in the process of becoming something different and, from our contemporary perspective, more familiar. In the foreword to the ICAF tome, another veteran of wartime mobilization planning, Arthur Flemming, described this new horizon of emergency government. At the time, Flemming was serving as director of the Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM). Created in 1950 to lead civilian mobilization planning for the Korean War, ODM had by 1953 become the most important domestic preparedness agency in the federal government. Surveying the landscape of the early Cold War, Flemming offered a grim assessment of the current world situation. The United States, he wrote, was in an “age of peril.” The advent of long-range bombers and atomic weapons confronted national security strategists with the specter of a sudden “devastating attack on the continental United States.” In the event of such a sudden attack, the United States would not have time to mobilize its “material and human resources” over the course of months or years, as it had in the prior two world wars. Rather, Flemming argued, the country would have to shift immediately to war footing and would be faced with managing the consequences of a crippling initial blow. Adequately preparing the nation for this eventuality could “save an untold number of human lives” and ensure that the United States could “continue a substantial portion of our war production and production essential for the holding together of our civilian economy.”\textsuperscript{4}

In light of these concerns about a devastating enemy attack, during the 1950s the civilian mobilization planning agencies turned their attention to a novel task. If earlier these agencies were concerned primarily with military-industrial production during a long war fought overseas, then increasingly their focus shifted to preparedness planning to ensure the survival of the national population and recovery of the economy in the aftermath of a domestic catastrophe. It is indicative of this shift that, by the early 1960s, the Office of Defense Mobilization had evolved into the Office of Emergency Planning, which was in turn renamed the Office of Emergency Preparedness. In 1962, the director of this office, Edward McDermott, outlined the aims and means of emergency government as they had come to be understood
by this time. Citing a draft executive order issued by President John F. Kennedy, McDermott reported that he had been charged with coordinating the “national preparedness program,” whose goal was to maintain a “state of readiness with respect to all conditions of national emergency.” This meant, first and foremost, maintaining an “emergency management organization” that would be prepared to “handle the myriad of resource and economic problems necessary to save lives and sustain survival and expedite recovery.” Reviewing these “resource and economic problems”—related to electric power, transportation, communications, food, and medical care—McDermott pointed to the vast scope of his office’s concern. “We are really talking about the fundamentals of life on this earth,” he intoned, “the elemental problems of safeguarding the food we eat, the fuel we consume, the transportation to maintain a steady flow of commerce, an intricate telecommunications system which will continue to function under all conditions, and perhaps most important, the foundation of constitutional government which underpins our way of life.”

In the decades since McDermott’s speech, practices for anticipating and managing emergencies have continued to evolve, and the organization of emergency government has been frequently reshuffled. But McDermott’s 1962 description of the task of governmental preparedness for emergency is strikingly similar to contemporary understandings. Emergency preparedness continues to focus on reducing the vulnerability of vital systems in anticipation of a range of potentially catastrophic future events, and on preparing for life-saving response and recovery in their aftermath. Thus, the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s 2015 National Preparedness Goal—which currently guides governmental preparedness for events ranging from terrorist attacks to hurricanes and pandemics—refers to a “secure and resilient Nation with the capabilities required across the whole community to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from the threats and hazards that pose the greatest risk.”

Today, as in the early 1960s, emergency preparedness aims to ensure governmental functions relating to “health and safety,”
“infrastructure systems,” “hydration, feeding, and sheltering,” that, in the
wake of a future disaster, will be essential to “rapidly meeting basic human
needs,” “restoring basic services,” “establishing a safe and secure environ-
ment,” and “supporting the transition to recovery.” And as has been true
since the beginning of the postwar period, emergency government today is
not an exception to the normal operation of the state. Rather, it encompasses
the management of unfolding emergencies and ongoing preparedness for
future emergency situations as permanent functions of normal government.

A Genealogy of Emergency Government

This book examines the formation of American emergency government in
the middle decades of the twentieth century. It follows the process through
which a governmental apparatus initially assembled to manage economic
depression and industrial mobilization for war mutated into an apparatus of
emergency preparedness for domestic catastrophe. The account presented
in this book is a genealogy of emergency government that traces how now-
familiar forms of knowledge, practices, and norms first came into being. It
is only relatively recently, we suggest, that we have come to understand and
organize emergency government as a matter of reducing the vulnerability of
vital systems, and it is only recently that preparedness for events that might
disrupt these systems has become a basic obligation of government.

This genealogical approach to the study of emergency government can be
usefully distinguished from histories of the field of disaster preparedness and
emergency management, which follow the changing forms of knowledge
and governance that have been applied to a certain class of phenomena—
disasters. For example, in Acts of God, historian Ted Steinberg traces how
the US government has understood and managed (or failed to manage) natu-
ral disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and storms, from the early days
of the American republic to the present. Scott Knowles, in The Disaster
Experts, constructs what he calls a “disaster chronology” over roughly the
same period, tracking how experts have made “the knowledge and control
of disasters their special concern.” In contrast to such historical studies of
disaster and disaster management, a genealogical approach asks how a range
of seemingly disparate phenomena, from nuclear attacks and economic
shocks to hurricanes and disease outbreaks, have been constituted as com-
mon types of events that present similar kinds of problems. Thus, the title of
this book—The Government of Emergency—does not refer to the way that a
pregiven class of events or situations has been governed. Rather, it refers to
a form of political rationality, which we understand, following sociologist Nikolas Rose, as an “intellectual machinery or apparatus for rendering reality thinkable in such a way that it is amenable to political programming.”

As Rose suggests, political rationalities have both normative and epistemological dimensions. On the one hand, a given political rationality entails specific assumptions about the “proper distribution of tasks between different authorities” and the “ideals or principles to which government should be addressed.” Thus, it implies certain presumptions (however contested and unstable) about what government is, what it should do, and what its limits should be. On the other hand, a political rationality involves a distinct “style of reasoning,” that is, a body of “intellectual techniques for rendering reality thinkable and practicable, and constituting domains that are amenable—or not amenable—to reformatory intervention.” Importantly, a style of reasoning entails specific “conceptions of the objects to be governed,” whether the national economy, the population, or the vulnerable, vital systems on which the economy and the population depend.

One strategy of genealogical research is to paint a “before and after” picture that aims, as Ian Hacking has put it, “to permanently fix in the mind of the reader the fact that some upheaval has occurred”—a momentous shift in ways of thinking and governing. Our account is framed by such a conceptual and political “upheaval,” in which new objects, aims, and practices of government came into being over a relatively brief period. But we also present a detailed account of how this momentous shift unfolded. We focus on specific organizations and on historically situated actors as they took up existing ways of knowing and intervening, or invented new ones, to address novel problems. Through these often-mundane practices, a new political rationality—and indeed, we suggest, a new dimension of political modernity—took shape over the period spanning roughly from the Great Depression through the early Cold War.

The first part of the book examines the period from the 1930s to the early 1940s, in which the federal government faced two conditions of “national emergency”: the Great Depression and World War II. During this period, emergency government largely involved economic interventions to ameliorate the Depression and to manage industrial production for total war. Chapter 1 follows the work of experts in a succession of domains—from city and regional planning to economic management, wartime mobilization, and air targeting—as they constituted vital systems as objects of systematic knowledge and as targets of intervention. Chapter 2 describes a parallel process through which government reformers invented administrative devices and
organizational forms to address the economic emergencies of depression and war. It focuses in particular on how these reformers addressed the tensions between liberal constitutionalism and crisis government by assembling what they called an “administrative machinery” to organize and prepare for emergency situations.

The book’s second part is situated in the years immediately after World War II, a period of heightening concern about the prospect of an enemy attack on the continental United States that would cripple military-industrial production systems. Chapter 3 shows how civilian experts and military officers developed systematic knowledge about American economic and infrastructural vulnerability and devised practices and understandings that would constitute a new kind of expertise—and a new kind of expert, the “vulnerability specialist.” Chapter 4 turns to the first efforts to develop techniques for reducing this vulnerability and preparing to manage the consequences of a massive attack. It examines postwar mobilization planning agencies, where experts and officials reoriented the existing institutions and practices of emergency government. If previously these institutions had focused on economic management of the unfolding emergencies of depression and war, their objective now shifted to preparing for a future war. Emergency government was thus becoming a matter of ongoing peacetime preparedness.

Part III traces a further shift in American emergency government that took place during the 1950s. As nuclear weapons and delivery systems grew increasingly powerful, mobilization planners deemphasized readiness to ramp up industrial production for a long war. Instead, they turned to the task of ensuring the continuous functioning of vital systems that would be required to sustain human life, economic activity, and governmental operations in the unprecedented conditions that would result from a thermonuclear attack. Chapter 5 examines the practices of “administrative readiness” developed by mobilization planners to prepare for government operations in a future emergency, culminating with a description of Mobilization Plan D-Minus (1957)—the first plan for national emergency preparedness in the United States. Chapter 6 focuses on one dimension of such national preparedness planning: the management of resources such as food, medical supplies, and services that would be essential to the population’s postattack survival. The chapter traces how mobilization planners used the new tool of computer simulation to envision and prepare for an unprecedented future event—a catastrophic nuclear attack.

By the late 1950s, emergency government, which had previously focused on alleviating economic depression and mobilizing for war, had mutated
into emergency preparedness for a future domestic catastrophe. A coherent set of understandings, practices, and organizational forms had consolidated into an apparatus that continues to structure emergency government—in the United States and beyond—to the present day. In the next two sections, we outline the broader conceptual and theoretical significance of this mutation in governmental rationality. First, we introduce the concept of vital systems security as a form of “reflexive biopolitics,” oriented to the management of uncertain and potentially catastrophic future events. We argue that, beginning with the midcentury episodes we examine, securing the nation’s vital systems has become a central norm of modern government. Second, we describe how American emergency government took shape as a response to the challenge that increasingly common use of emergency powers during war and economic crisis posed to democratic government. In these contexts, reformers assembled a political technology for governing emergencies that, they thought, would make it possible to avoid recourse to exceptional measures that would undermine constitutional democracy.

**Vital Systems Security**

In 1984, applied mathematician and security expert Robert Kupperman published *Technological Advances and Consequent Dangers*, a working paper for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank based in Washington, DC. Kupperman’s essay was a far-reaching reflection on the vulnerability of vital systems as a central problem of national security. For our purposes, Kupperman’s paper indicates how system vulnerability was linked to a broader problematization of risk and security in modern societies. For millennia, Kupperman argued, human beings had faced relatively localized and “self-extinguishing” threats that were “dissipated by the distribution of cultural assets, by the existence of physical and psychological ‘hinterlands,’ and by the cushioning function of institutional diversity and independence.” Even the cataclysm of World War I was a contained event. “Diversities, distances, and differences, systematic inefficiencies of civilization in themselves,” he argued, “provided the recuperative forces necessary to maintain continuity.” But in the intervening years, the “extension of technology in the service of civilization” had enabled human beings to move “into every suitable niche, and even into some not so suitable.” The increasingly “efficient, economical infrastructure” required to sustain this process carried with it an unacknowledged price. “Modern technological efficiency in the provision of food, water, energy, medicine, transport and
communication,” he wrote, has been “oriented toward economic affordability without much attention to complex network fragility.” Pointing to the “interlocking technologies” that underpin the “fragile dynamic cycle of production, transportation, and consumption” in contemporary societies, Kupperman argued that the “greater a society’s dependence for survival on its technological infrastructure, the greater its vulnerability to a collapse triggered naturally or artificially at a key point.” Like biological organisms, contemporary human societies could not manage “fundamental system failures multiplying at a biological rate.” “A critical point is reached,” Kupperman warned. “A cascade of organ-system failures ensues, and death comes quickly.” Modern civilization, in developing technologies oriented to furthering the “ends of human life,” had created a system whose “success and importance to social survival make it, ironically, one of society’s greatest weaknesses.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, the kinds of hazards that Kupperman identified—what sociologist Ulrich Beck describes as “modernization risks”—were taking on a new kind of public and political life. Economic and energy shocks, environmental crisis, and terrorism garnered increasing attention alongside the paradigmatic specter of catastrophic risk, thermonuclear war, which raised the prospect, for the first time, of self-inflicted human extinction. Kupperman’s reflections are especially significant for our story given his career trajectory, which passed through some of the mostly forgotten technical domains in which, we show in this book, the vulnerability of vital systems was identified and addressed as a matter of governmental concern.

In 1980, Kupperman served the incoming Ronald Reagan administration as the head of the transition for the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which President Jimmy Carter had created by executive order in 1979. Prior to that, during the 1960s and early 1970s, Kupperman had worked in one of FEMA’s predecessors, the Office of Emergency Preparedness (OEP). As director of the Systems Evaluation Division within OEP, Kupperman oversaw studies on “the impact on the Nation’s security and economy created by emergency contingencies of both military and non-military nature,” examining issues such as natural disaster assistance, the continuity of government, damage assessment, resource management, and the “survivability of networks related to national preparedness.”

The arc of Kupperman’s career points us to a broader question: How did it become possible to understand collective existence in the United States as dependent on a complex of vital and vulnerable systems, and how did the protection of such systems come to be a taken-for-granted obligation
of contemporary government? In the chapters that follow we show that, for nearly a century, a persistent discourse has examined collective life from a particular point of view: the vulnerability of modern society and economy to disruption of the vital systems on which they depend. And since at least the early Cold War, the federal government has been concerned with ensuring the continuous functioning of such systems in the face of catastrophic threats. Today, this problem of “vital systems security” is a central object and aim of government, defined in legislation, executive orders, and broad statements of security strategy.

REFLEXIVE BIOPOLITICS

We analyze the emergence of vital systems security as the product of a mutation in the government of modern life. Specifically, it marks a reflexive moment in the history of “biopolitics”—that is, the government of human beings in relation to their biological and social existence. Michel Foucault famously coined the term “biopolitics” to mark a shift, dating roughly to the late eighteenth century, in the aims and objects of government in European countries: from the “classical sovereignty” of the European territorial monarchies to a new governmental concern with ensuring the health and well-being of national populations.22 Classical sovereignty, Foucault argued, ruled “from the standpoint of the juridical-political notion” of the legal subject. Diplomatic, military, and police apparatuses—elements of what might be called “sovereign state security”—aimed to ensure the security of the state itself in the face of foreign and domestic threats. By contrast, biopolitical government is exercised over the population—a collection of living beings understood as a “technical-political object of management.” Foucault traced the “birth of biopolitics” to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe, when government authorities sought to manage the health and welfare of populations in growing urban centers. The rapid growth of towns, the expansion of industry, the intensification of trade, and increasingly crowded living conditions posed “new and specific economic and political problems of governmental technique.” In response, officials, planners, and experts in the nascent human sciences invented new forms of knowledge about—and devices for governing—the “fine materiality of human existence and coexistence, of exchange and circulation.”23 As Foucault emphasized, the point is not that the birth of biopolitics displaced prior mechanisms of sovereignty; indeed, particularly with the advent of total war, threats to sovereignty were a key catalyst for the development of biopolitics. Rather, the
theme of biopolitics designates the interplay between the exercise of juridi-
cal power over legal subjects and the technical management of living beings.

Building on Foucault’s analysis, scholars have traced the development of biopolitical government in a range of domains from the early nineteenth
century. In efforts to reduce the toll of epidemics, organize conscription for
war, or manage economic fluctuations, government bureaucracies generated
vast amounts of data about phenomena such as birth, illness, and death; sui-
cide and crime; and levels of production and employment.24 This “avalanche
of numbers,” as Hacking puts it, made possible a new, statistical understand-
ing of collective life.25 The technical and political category of risk played a
central role in this development, enabling experts and government officials
to quantitatively analyze how phenomena such as crime, illness, accident,
and poverty were distributed over a given population, and to assess the costs
and benefits of measures to minimize these risks.26 New governmental appa-
ratuses in areas such as economic regulation, urban planning, and public
health specified and managed these problems. As Foucault describes this
complex process, a “constant interplay between techniques of power and
their object” served to “carve out” the population and its specific phenomena
(birth and death rates, disease processes, etc.) as a “field of reality.”27

We take up this story of biopolitical modernity at a later conjuncture
and in a different locale. Beginning in the early twentieth century, American
planners and policymakers in various domains argued that with the develop-
ment of mass industrial and metropolitan societies, the interdependencies
that made modern collective life possible also rendered it vulnerable to cata-
strophic disruption from events such as economic shocks, industrial acci-
dents, or wars. Over the following decades, experts and officials addressed
this vulnerability by devising new ways to anticipate and mitigate the effects
of such events, to reduce the vulnerability of vital systems, and to make
society resilient to shocks.28

The first governmental apparatus for securing vital systems was assem-
bled in the 1950s. In the early Cold War, planners and officials working on
nuclear preparedness brought together a set of elements—knowledge forms,
techniques of intervention, and organizational arrangements—that consti-
tuted system vulnerability as a target of governmental intervention. Like
the demographers, public health experts, and urbanists of the nineteenth
century, mobilization planners produced an “avalanche of numbers” about
collective existence, not through statistical analysis of populations but by
using scenarios, catastrophe models, and vulnerability assessments. Through
this process, society became vulnerable in a novel way. Like the figure of
population a century earlier, a new figure of collective life—the vulnerable, vital system—was “carved out” as an object of expert knowledge, technical intervention, and political concern.

By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, this apparatus of vital systems security had been extended into new domains, including natural disaster response, pandemic preparedness, the management of economic crises, and homeland security. This is not to say that vital systems security displaced prior forms of security or became the dominant form of collective security. As we will show, vital systems security emerged and consolidated in complex relation to sovereign state security and population security. Thus, the officials and planners in the 1950s-era Office of Defense Mobilization viewed the task of ensuring the functioning of vital systems in the wake of a nuclear attack as a matter of sovereign state security—prevailing in a future war. Meanwhile, vital systems security has become central to many domains of biopolitical government, including the provision of population security in areas such as public health, urban planning, and economic governance. Indeed, we suggest that vital systems security should be understood as a form of “reflexive biopolitics.” It shares the aim of population security: ensuring the health and welfare of populations. But these two forms of biopolitical security differ in their objects of concern, knowledge practices, and norms (see table 1). Whereas population security addresses regularly occurring events that can be managed through the distribution of risk, vital systems security deals with events whose probability cannot be precisely calculated, but whose consequences are potentially catastrophic. Vital systems security does not rely on statistical analysis of past events, but rather employs techniques of enactment such as catastrophe models and scenario-based exercises to simulate potential future events and thereby generate knowledge about present vulnerabilities. Its interventions seek to increase the resilience of critical systems and to bolster preparedness for future emergencies.

A NEW POLITICAL RATIONALITY

Our claim is not that governmental concern with vital systems is itself novel. Governments have long been concerned with vital systems like roads, communication networks, and large systems of water management. The construction and control of transportation, energy, and communication systems—what has only recently come to be called “infrastructure”—is
found in all large-scale complex societies. Territorial empires have for centuries recognized what were referred to as “communications” as essential to prosperity and security. And military strategists have long been concerned with the importance of transportation and communication for military lines of supply; the military tactic of blockade goes back millennia. But from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, we observe a significant intensification and modulation of these concerns. In particular, three features distinguish vital systems security as a political rationality and delimit the conceptual and empirical scope of this book: first, its relationship to biopolitics; second, the emergence of specialized expertise about vital systems; and third, the consolidation of a new political norm—that governments must ensure the ongoing functioning of vital systems in the face of catastrophic threats.

**Vital systems and modern biopolitics.** First, we can refer to vital systems security in the sense we use the term here only with the emergence of
modern biopolitics. Electricity networks, railroads, and complex chains of production became “vital systems” when they were linked to newly constituted problem domains such as the national economy or social welfare.\textsuperscript{34} Although this development can be traced to the late nineteenth century, particularly in European contexts,\textsuperscript{35} our narrative begins in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. We focus on two apparently disparate fields: regional planning and strategic bombing theory.\textsuperscript{36} Experts in these fields initially used biological metaphors to illustrate the dependence of collective existence on what Muir Fairchild, an instructor at the US Army’s Air Corps Tactical School in the 1930s, called “life-sustaining vital systems.”\textsuperscript{37} Fairchild’s term suggested that, like the failure of vital organs or the breakdown of circulatory systems in a biological organism, the disruption of such systems would be catastrophic to the social body. As another Air Corps instructor put it in 1938, as the United States had “grown and prospered in proportion to the excellence of its industrial system,” it had become “more vulnerable . . . to wartime collapse caused by the cutting of one or more of its essential arteries.”\textsuperscript{38} The use of such biological metaphors would fade over time (though never disappear, as Kupperman’s 1984 report demonstrates). But from the case studies of the Air Corps Tactical School and the quantitative analyses of “criticality” and “essentiality” in wartime and postwar facilities ratings to contemporary assessments of critical infrastructure vulnerability or resilience, experts have defined the “vitality” of vital systems, and the threat posed by their disruption, in terms of these systems’ role in the health and well-being of populations—the central concerns of biopolitical government.

**System vulnerability expertise.** Second, vital systems security is distinguished by the development of specialized knowledge that constitutes vital systems and their vulnerability as objects of expert analysis and rational-technical intervention. By the mid-twentieth century, technical specialists and officials working in mobilization and air-targeting agencies had devised new practices for assessing vulnerability and preparing for future events that might disrupt the nation’s vital systems. This new form of expertise rested on the accumulation of a vast amount of information about American natural resources, productive facilities, and public works—what President Franklin Delano Roosevelt referred to in 1935 as an “inventory of our national assets.”\textsuperscript{39} Such expertise also drew on techniques for analyzing the interrelationships among the elements that this “inventory” comprised. Although specialists from many fields were involved in constituting vital systems—and
the vulnerability of these systems—as objects of systematic knowledge, economists played a particularly prominent role. Economists first appear in our account during the New Deal, inventing a “science of flows” to analyze how shocks would propagate through the economic system, whether these shocks resulted from a plunge in demand during economic downturns or from a surge in demand caused by government stimulus policies or wartime mobilization. A number of these New Deal economists then migrated to air intelligence offices during World War II, where they developed an “economics of strategic target selection” to assess the vulnerability of enemy production systems and to recommend bombing targets. A decade prior to the development of “systems analysis” at the RAND Corporation in the 1950s, these mobilization planners and air intelligence specialists established methods for the quantitative analysis of military-industrial complexes as ensembles of interlocking vital systems.

In the closing years of World War II and the early Cold War, technical experts coupled the analysis of vital systems with new methods for modeling how a catastrophic event—such as an incendiary bombing attack on a city (during World War II) or an atomic detonation (after the war)—would unfold in space. As we show in chapter 3, these experts produced a new kind of knowledge about vital and vulnerable systems. Initially, military analysts in air intelligence units used graphical techniques such as maps and transparent overlays to generate assessments of urban and industrial vulnerability. By the mid-1950s, vulnerability experts had replaced maps and physical overlays with digital computers and geographically tagged data sets—a precursor of geographic information systems (GIS). The advent of computer simulation added another dimension to vulnerability analysis. By incorporating randomization procedures and multiple simulated runs in their models, vulnerability specialists could account for uncertainties about how a future attack would unfold. These simulation techniques—initially used as speculative “experiments” or “war games” as part of nuclear preparedness planning (see chapter 6)—have come to be accepted in various domains as authoritative tools for generating knowledge about uncertain future events.

Vital systems security as political obligation and norm. Third, and finally, vital systems security refers to an increasingly taken-for-granted norm of politics. After World War II, the task of ensuring the continuous operation of vital systems and managing the risk of catastrophic disruption came to be accepted as a basic obligation of sovereign government. This was not the first
time that the US government was expected to deal with the consequences of domestic catastrophes. As Michele Landis Dauber has documented, there is a long American tradition of federal relief following disasters. But prior to the middle of the twentieth century, these governmental responses were ad hoc, organized in the wake of what were understood to be unforeseeable “acts of god.” Only in the last several decades has government been held responsible for preparing in advance of future catastrophes that can be anticipated if not precisely predicted. And only in the last several decades has this obligation been addressed, at least in part, by technical measures that aim to ensure the functioning of vital systems.

The first statutory mention of this new governmental obligation (discussed in chapter 4) was in the 1947 National Security Act. The Act created a new peacetime mobilization agency—the National Security Resources Board (NSRB)—and charged it with undertaking measures to protect “industries, services, Government and economic activities” whose “continuous operation” Congress deemed “essential to the Nation’s security.” The NSRB was a defense mobilization agency, in which the norm of “preparedness” still referred to military-industrial readiness for war. But planners working in government agencies charged with preparedness gradually adapted these techniques to address other kinds of potentially catastrophic events, such as hurricanes, floods, and infectious disease outbreaks. By the 1960s, the norm of preparedness could refer to any event that might catastrophically disrupt the nation’s vital systems. The organization of responsibility for emergency preparedness has shifted almost constantly over the subsequent decades, and attention to this problem has ebbed and flowed. But the task of ensuring the continuous operation of vital systems is now a virtually unquestioned—if not always successfully met—obligation of contemporary government.

An “Administrative Machinery” for Governing Emergencies

The prior section described how experts and officials constituted system vulnerability as an object of specialized knowledge and a target of governmental intervention during the Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War. But on its own, this description of expert knowledge and technical interventions is too serene. It is too serene, in part, because these “interventions” into vital systems were closely linked to projects—whether war mobilization, strategic air targeting, or nuclear preparedness—that involved the mass slaughter of civilians, the annihilation of cities, and,
after World War II, the prospect of nuclear holocaust. It is also too serene because the developments we have described corresponded to an upheaval in American government. Technical experts and government officials often instituted the mechanisms of vital systems security through “emergency” measures that challenged American political traditions, such as deference to legislative prerogative and judicial precedent, as well as a diffuse and decentralized pattern of sovereignty. An account of the emergence and consolidation of vital systems security must, therefore, address the fraught relationship between emergency powers and constitutional democracy.

As a point of entry into these questions, we turn to the writings of a prominent midcentury American commentator on crisis government, political scientist Clinton Rossiter. Rossiter began his seminal study Constitutional Dictatorship, published in 1948, with a question that President Abraham Lincoln had posed at the outset of the American Civil War. “Is there in all republics,” Lincoln asked, “this inherent and fatal weakness? Must a government be too strong for the liberties of its people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?” Had Lincoln been alive on the eve of World War II, Rossiter observed, he could have “framed his question in more modern terms.” Was it possible for a democracy to “fight a successful total war and still be a democracy when the war is over?” For Rossiter, writing just after the end of World War II, the “incontestable facts of history” had provided an answer. “We have fought a successful total war,” Rossiter declared, “and we are still a democracy.” In this “severe national emergency,” the US government had employed “devices and techniques” that made it “strong enough to maintain its own existence without at the same time being so strong as to subvert the liberties of the people it has been instituted to defend.”

In what follows, we show that the “devices and techniques” Rossiter referred to were the product of efforts by governmental reformers who, during the New Deal and World War II, sought to meet the challenge that, they thought, emergency situations posed to constitutional democracy. These reformers assembled what Rossiter called an “administrative machinery” that would enable the US federal government, especially its executive branch, to manage emergency situations through expert rule without recourse to an extra-constitutional state of exception. They believed, like Rossiter, that in an era of pervasive doubt about the prospects for democracy, they had successfully responded to the “taunt of the dictators” that “democracies cannot meet the demands of the modern world and still remain democratic,” as the reformer Luther Gulick put it in 1941. Our aim in describing these reformers’ efforts is not to assess the validity of such claims. Rather, it is to
reconstruct how they formulated and sought to address the problem that emergencies posed to democratic constitutionalism. Their responses shaped a distinctive political technology for governing emergency situations.

DEMOCRACY, EMERGENCY, AND THE MODERN AMERICAN STATE

Our account begins in the early twentieth century. At this time, Progressive reformers argued that, as Charles Merriam put it in 1933, governments had “to undertake new activities” to address intensifying processes of urbanization and industrialization. Among these new activities were the management of “public welfare, including education, recreation, health, social relief, and welfare planning”; the construction of public works, such as “highways and aid to communications”; and the “central control over social and economic forces.”\(^50\) The challenge, Merriam and other reformers held, was that American governmental institutions, which were set up when the United States was a largely rural and sparsely populated country, were ill suited to the functions required of what they referred to as a “positive state” that was involved in managing the health, well-being, and conditions of existence of a rapidly growing and an increasingly urban population. Merriam described this mismatch as “social lag” and argued for governmental “adjustment.”\(^51\) On the one hand, technical experts would have to play an expanded role in political administration. On the other hand, such an “adjustment” would require a significant shift in the locus of political authority: centralization to address issues that crossed local jurisdictional boundaries and decisive executive leadership to manage urgent social and economic problems.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, administrative reformers succeeded in instituting significant changes along the lines Merriam and other Progressives prescribed. Initially, their efforts focused on state and local governments, as they sought to deal with the growing pressures of urban growth and industrial expansion. By the 1930s, in the context of the New Deal, these reformers turned their attention to the national level and the federal government, where they confronted the “emergency” situations of the Great Depression and World War II. Between 1933 and 1945, federal agencies took on a vast range of new functions relating to the provision of social welfare, economic management, and industrial mobilization.\(^52\) To better equip the federal government—particularly the executive branch—to meet these new demands, Progressive reformers working in and around the Roosevelt administration pushed through a series of laws and administrative changes. Partly as a result of their efforts, the American presidency, which
began the 1930s as a solitary office with a small staff, emerged from the war as a powerful office that oversaw an array of agencies, wielding formidable discretionary powers. New expert bodies were scattered throughout the executive branch, and new mechanisms of rational-technical administration were woven into laws and regulations.

Political commentators of the 1940s and 1950s were acutely aware that the economic and military emergencies of the period had wrought dramatic changes in the structure of US government. In 1950, Rossiter wrote that the "startling succession of major emergencies" had produced an "extraordinary expansion in the authority of the national executive, in both relative and absolute terms." The presidencies of 1933 and of 1945, he observed, were two "perceptibly different offices, in fact as well as constitutional theory." In 1952, James Fesler also linked the "unbroken series of emergencies" of this period to a dramatic transformation of the American state. "One of the most striking changes occurring in the form and functions of the American Government in the present century," Fesler argued, "has been the rapid growth...of governmental administrative activities." The federal government had "entered into a new world of administrative empires, alphabetic agencies, organizational charts, high and low levels or echelons, coordinators and expediters—all explained in strange terms of technical official rhetoric."

In the last seventy years, scholars have continually returned to these episodes in which, to modify Charles Tilly's phrase, the emergencies of economic depression and total war (and later, Cold War) made the modern American state. Our book addresses a more specific question that has received less attention: How did these events shape the American emergency state with which we are familiar today, whose major concern is reducing the vulnerability of vital systems and preparing for events that threaten to disrupt the operation of these systems? To answer this question, we turn from the broad problem of governmental "adjustment" to the specific challenge that, reformers thought, emergencies posed in the first half of the twentieth century.

**CRISIS GOVERNMENT: “RATIONALISM, TECHNICALITY, AND THE EXECUTIVE”**

Historians have documented a significant shift in the range of situations in which governments invoked emergency powers in the early twentieth century, both in Europe and in the United States. Previously, governments most frequently drew on emergency powers to address wars, rebellions,
and other threats to state sovereignty. By contrast, in the first decades of the twentieth century, governments increasingly invoked emergency powers in response to events such as labor strikes, financial crises, and economic downturns, in which a direct threat to sovereignty was absent.\(^{58}\) Notably for our purposes, governments often drew on emergency powers to address threats to the functioning of vital systems in urban and industrial societies. The British Emergency Powers Act of 1920, for example, authorized actions to limit strike activity that interfered “with the supply and distribution of food, water, fuel, or light, or with the means of locomotion.”\(^{59}\) Emergency measures in the United States addressed similar problems. As historian Harold L. Platt has documented, the surge in demand produced by industrial mobilization during the World War I resulted in “terrifying famines of food and fuel” in cities, which were “exacerbated by a virtual gridlock of the nation’s transportation.”\(^{60}\) Wartime emergency measures such as price and production controls addressed such breakdowns in vital systems.

If threats to the functioning of vital systems presented governments with novel technical problems, they also presented a political challenge. Was constitutional liberalism compatible with the decisive executive action and rational-technical administration required to manage crisis situations? This question was most famously posed by German jurist Carl Schmitt in his writings of the 1920s and 1930s. American reformers were aware of and on occasion referred to Schmitt’s arguments in their own reflections on emergency powers and democratic government. For our purposes, Schmitt’s analysis of political authority in crisis situations allows us to pinpoint the fundamental problem that these reformers identified with the exercise of emergency powers in a democracy.

In his 1921 study *Dictatorship*, Schmitt outlined the challenge that emergency situations posed to liberal constitutional government.\(^{61}\) With their emphasis on deliberation, legislative prerogative, democratic rule by the governed, and deference to precedent and legal norms, Schmitt argued, liberal constitutional governments were rigidly oriented to the past. This orientation was adequate to normal politics, when governments were dealing with familiar situations whose contours could be anticipated based on prior experience. But it was inadequate when governments faced economic shocks, political insurrections, and wars, which demanded a future-oriented form of executive power that could decisively respond to the ever-changing and unforeseeable demands of an emergency situation.\(^{62}\) “If the concrete means of achieving a goal can, under normal circumstances, be predicted with regularity,” Schmitt wrote, then in “cases of emergency” government
had to “do everything that is appropriate in the actual circumstances.” Emergency government, for Schmitt, could be conducted only through discretionary executive authority based on the rational-technical—rather than charismatic and political—“needs” of a situation. It required rule by “dictate” and, crucially, according to the “dictates” of a given crisis as it unfolded. It is this model of emergency government that Schmitt referred to as “dictatorship,” based on the model of the Roman “commissarial” dictatorship, which was appointed for the duration of an emergency. For Schmitt, “dictatorship” did not imply an absence of constitutional or legal constraints. Rather, it referred specifically to the rational-technical character of discretionary executive authority: the actions of a dictator could be judged only by asking “whether the means, in a very technical sense, are appropriate or not—that is, whether they have achieved their goal.” In this sense, dictatorship was for Schmitt a “political technology” of crisis government, a particular way of arranging “rationalism, technicality, and the executive.”

The question that American reformers raised about the “adjustment” of governmental institutions to an urban and industrial society resonated deeply with Schmitt’s analysis: How, in liberal democracies, could technical rule and executive power be mobilized to address the distinctive challenges that confronted modern states? And some of these reformers, in seeking out models for emergency government under these circumstances, followed Schmitt in looking to the Roman model of the commissarial dictatorship. This was true not only of academic observers like Rossiter—who wrote extensively on the Roman institution in the 1940s—but also of the administrative reformers who were directly involved in assembling the institutions of American emergency government in the 1930s. Thus, Charles Merriam analyzed the Roman conception of dictatorship as early as 1900 in his study The History of the Theory of Sovereignty Since Rousseau. He returned to the concept again in The New Democracy and the New Despotism, written in 1939, when, significantly, legislation to adjust the American executive to meet the demands of emergency situations was under debate. Defending the concept “in its historic sense” (and citing Schmitt’s 1921 study), Merriam wrote that dictatorship was a “temporary device to meet an emergency,” one that was fully compatible with democratic government. “Pestilence, war, famine, flood, panic, depression,” he explained, “are crisis moments when decisionism is concentrated in the hands of one or a few who may act before it is too late.”

If Schmitt’s analysis in Dictatorship helps us to pinpoint how American reformers framed the problem of crisis government—as a matter of finding
an accommodation between executive power, rational-technical rule, and constitutional democracy—it also casts these reformers’ distinctive response to this challenge in relief. Schmitt had drawn a distinction between a “commissarial” dictatorship—based on the Roman model—and what he called a “sovereign” dictatorship. A commissarial dictator was created by legislative decision, hemmed in by the constitution, and limited to the duration of a given crisis. Meanwhile, sovereign dictatorship—which Schmitt soon came to favor—stood entirely outside of law and the constitution. For American governmental reformers, in contrast, the problem was not one of choosing between these two models of dictatorship, since they considered “sovereign” dictatorship to be unacceptable in the American governmental system. Rather, they sought to design a form of commissarial dictatorship that was compatible with US political institutions. Rossiter, who wrote extensively on this problem after World War II, argued that in drawing a broad distinction between commissarial and sovereign dictatorship, Schmitt had lumped together a vast range of “heterogeneous offices under the former category.”

Referring to debates about emergency powers in Weimar Germany (a key point of reference for Schmitt), Rossiter found it strange that so much “energy should have been expended on this question of how much of the Constitution could be disregarded by a President in the use of emergency powers and so little in working out a law that would have settled many of the uncertainties and ambiguities” about the nature of emergency powers and how they would be marshaled.

This precise problem was the focus of American reformers’ attention beginning in the late 1930s. In contrast to Schmitt’s “latitudinarian” view of the emergency powers implied by a commissarial dictatorship, American reformers labored to define the particular techniques and organizational forms of emergency government, and to specify how these would be constrained by statutory provisions, governmental checks, and constitutional restraints. In this sense, as Kim Lane Scheppelle has noted, these mechanisms of emergency government were “crucially non-Schmittian” because they were never “outside the law.” Instead, they were based on “alternative forms of legality” that were lodged within the “processes of normal governance.”

The American approach to emergency government was not planned all at once as an abstract blueprint. Rather, it gradually evolved through a series of political and administrative struggles that we examine in the chapters that follow: over executive branch reform in the late 1930s, over the control of
mobilization planning during World War II, over planning for urban and industrial dispersal in the late 1940s, and over nuclear preparedness planning in the 1950s. By the mid-1950s, a political technology of emergency government had consolidated that is more or less recognizable today. On the one hand, this political technology involved an “administrative machinery” of emergency government, through which the executive was organized, and the power to rule was distributed among its parts. On the other hand, it involved techniques of administrative readiness to prepare the government to assume the form and the functions that would be required to manage an emergency (see table 2).

**The structure of emergency government.** One distinctive feature of the American political technology of emergency government is an “administrative machinery” designed to establish strong executive authority to manage emergency situations without undermining civilian rule. The recommendations of Progressive reformers working on a 1937 Committee on Administrative Management (described in chapter 2) laid the groundwork for this structure of emergency government. In combination with a number of “delegatory statutes” that transferred certain legislative powers to the

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**Table 2. The American political technology of emergency government**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic features</th>
<th>Key development(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrative machinery of emergency government</td>
<td><strong>Executive control</strong> exercised by small planning and management offices working under the president that provide a center for preparedness, coordination, and command</td>
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<td>Reorganization Act; Office for Emergency Management (1939–1941)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Delegatory statutes</strong> that temporarily transfer legislative authorities to the executive for the duration of an emergency</td>
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<td>Lend-Lease, Stockpiling Act; War Powers Act (1939–1942)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Distributed structure of emergency government</strong> among various executive branch agencies and among state and local governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Delegations to emergency offices and executive departments (1942–1943; 1950s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Techniques of administrative readiness</td>
<td><strong>Emergency government planning</strong> for emergency organization, essential functions, and action steps</td>
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<td>NSRB and ODM work on preparedness (1949–1955)</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Planning for uncertain future catastrophes</strong> using scenario-based exercises and catastrophe models to formulate and test preparedness plans</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>ODM work on D-Minus Process (1955–1957)</td>
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president, a 1939 Reorganization Act allowed Roosevelt to wield discretionary authority during emergency situations. Roosevelt drew on this authority to address the ongoing Depression and to manage the large-scale mobilization needed to prepare for an anticipated war. Following the German invasion of France, Roosevelt created an Office for Emergency Management within the Executive Office of the President. The first director of the Office for Emergency Management, William McReynolds, described it as a “device through which [the president] can exercise immediate supervision and control over emergency situations.” During World War II, the Office for Emergency Management served, following Rossiter, as an “administrative sky-hook” on which Roosevelt could suspend a succession of emergency agencies—such as the Supply Priorities and Allocations Board and the War Production Board—in which technical experts managed the war production effort. The Office for Emergency Management was the prototype for subsequent executive branch emergency planning and management offices, from the 1950s-era Office of Defense Mobilization to today’s Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Another feature of American emergency government, as initially assembled under the Office of Emergency Management during World War II, was its “distributed” character. It established a central locus for coordination and control while preserving the diffused sovereignty of the US constitutional system. Within the federal government, American emergency planning and management since the 1950s has been distributed across federal agencies. Since these agencies are empowered by legislation, they are subject to congressional oversight, thus preserving, at least in principle, the balance of power among the branches of government. Emergency planning and management has also been distributed between the federal government and states, based on a coordinative structure that maintains state sovereignty while enabling states to request assistance from federal authorities when overwhelmed.

Techniques of administrative readiness. A second distinguishing feature of the American political technology for governing emergencies is a practice that Cold War preparedness planners called “administrative readiness.” In their work on administrative readiness, planners sought to address what Schmitt identified as a particular limitation of liberal constitutional regimes in dealing with emergency situations: their reliance on legislation that “codifies a series of expectations drawn from the experiences of legislators” based on the past, rather than a future-oriented anticipatory planning for
unexpected contingencies. By using techniques of anticipatory knowledge, the practice of administrative readiness created new kinds of “expectations” and “experiences” about uncertain future events so that officials could prepare for emergencies within the framework of constitutional government.

These techniques of administrative readiness were developed in the period immediately after World War II, when mobilization planning offices shifted from operational tasks of wartime resource management to preparedness for a future emergency. One set of techniques involved advanced planning for the temporary government organization that would come into being in a future emergency. Among these were “blueprint” planning for emergency offices and standby legislation; lists of essential functions that emergency government offices would assume; and plans that detailed action steps to be taken in a future emergency. When mobilization planners began to work on these techniques of administrative readiness in the late 1940s, they assumed that a future war would look more or less like World War II, in which the government would manage a long period of military-industrial production. But by the mid-1950s, planners became convinced that, with the advent of ever-more powerful weapons and delivery systems, a future emergency would demand “entirely new and grotesquely different functions” that had “no human experience behind them,” as mobilization planner Edwin George put it in 1956. In response, they devised new techniques, such as scenario-based exercises and computer-based procedures for simulating nuclear attacks, to anticipate the governmental functions that would be required in a future emergency and to identify gaps in preparedness in the present.

The Politics of Contemporary Security

Today we are regularly confronted with evidence of our vulnerability to catastrophic events, and, certainly, with the toll exacted by natural disasters, technological accidents, disease outbreaks, and other events that disrupt vital systems or that challenge our collective capacity to organize emergency response. Expert bodies, government commissions, and media reports tirelessly document what sociologist Craig Calhoun has described as a “world of emergencies.” Meanwhile, emergency declarations are routine features of governmental practice, both in the United States and globally. Beyond the specific political debates such events engender—What went wrong? Who is to blame? Are we prepared for the next emergency?—a number of social theorists and political commentators have argued that the apparent ubiquity
of catastrophes and of governmental states of emergency is diagnostic of the political condition of the present, raising fundamental questions about security, rationality, and democracy. Our analysis in this book does not directly engage in such theoretical debates. But by investigating the forgotten contexts in which taken-for-granted ways of thinking and governing initially took shape, it may cast these debates in a new light.

**Catastrophe and the limits of calculative rationality.** One strain of critical analysis has examined how the specter of impending catastrophe challenges expert understandings of risk and the forms of social and economic security that became authoritative in industrial modernity. For instance, in his work on reflexive modernization, Ulrich Beck distinguishes between two phases of modernity. He argues that “first modernity,” which arose in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, was characterized by the establishment of institutions for managing risks such as unemployment, endemic disease, and accidental death. These risks were relatively predictable and bounded, Beck argues, and so security mechanisms such as social insurance or infrastructure provision could be used to distribute their effects over larger collectives.78 “Second modernity,” by contrast, is characterized by the proliferation of unpredictable and uncontrollable hazards that threaten to destroy “the very foundations of life.”79 Beck analyzes a range of such threats, from ecological catastrophe, global financial crisis, and the spread of chemical toxins to mass-casualty terrorism, nuclear war, and climate change. A key feature of these new hazards—and a defining element of the “reflexive” quality of second modernity—is that they have been generated by the very processes that modernization projects sought to foster: industrialization, urbanization, and technological innovation.80 Because these reflexive risks are unpredictable and have potentially unbounded effects, according to Beck, they “escape the institutions for monitoring and protection” that have been embedded in governmental institutions over the past century.81 There “is no expert” in managing such risks, Beck writes; even when technical specialists can estimate the probability or consequences of a given hazard, these assessments often cannot provide authoritative guides for political action to mitigate risk.82

For Beck, the ubiquity of catastrophic risk is a key to understanding the political condition of the present. Reflexive modernization, he argues, presents “totally new types of challenges to democracy,” as established accommodations between security, expertise, and governmental action are thrown into disarray.83 Here, Beck’s argument converges with a broader literature that has examined what François Ewald refers to as the “deeply disturbed
relationship” that exists today between democratic publics and “a science that is consulted less for the knowledge it offers than for the doubt it insinuates.” For some observers, this circumstance demands a new politics oriented to the precautionary avoidance of catastrophic risk, or the replacement of discredited technocratic institutions by reinvigorated democracy. As Sheila Jasanoff has put it, “The problem we urgently face, is how to live democratically and at peace with the knowledge that our societies are inevitably ‘at risk’. Critically important questions of risk management cannot be addressed by technical experts with conventional tools of prediction.” A more ominous prospect is what Beck refers to as a “totalitarianism of hazard prevention,” in which democratic processes are suspended in the name of the “right to prevent the worst,” and the “exceptional condition” produced by uncontrolled catastrophes “threatens to become the norm.”

State of emergency—the exception as norm. This prospect—that in contemporary democracies the “exceptional condition threatens to become the norm”—is approached from a very different perspective by a number of critical thinkers who have analyzed the relationship between emergency powers and liberal constitutional government. Much of this work was written in response to the expanding emergency powers marshaled by the US government following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and focuses on surveillance policies, the treatment of terrorism suspects, and other aspects of the “war on terror.” This work links the proliferation of emergency measures in the aftermath of 9/11 to a broader tendency in modern democracies to govern through emergency powers. For example, philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that persistent and widespread recourse to emergency measures suggests that mechanisms of dictatorial rule, unbounded by juridical or legislative restraints, are transforming constitutional order “to varying degrees in all the Western democracies.” According to Agamben, “states of exception” to normal constitutional order exemplify the general condition of modern democracies.

In Critique of Security, political theorist Mark Neocleous passes through similar historical territory, examining how, in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, liberal constitutional governments refashioned the institutions of the state of siege and martial law—originally invoked when states faced direct threats to sovereign power—as more general political instruments. Initially, these governments deployed such tools to wage class war against organized labor through disciplinary measures to break strikes and ensure economic flows. Today, Neocleous
argues, liberal governments invoke emergency powers to address other phenomena, from the catastrophic to the apparently trivial: famines, drug abuse epidemics, football hooliganism, and natural disasters or “even just a bit of unusual weather.”\(^9\) For Neocleous, the elision of the distinction among different kinds of emergency undermines the very idea of normalcy. The result, he claims, is an insidious securitization and militarization of civil government, as the “state of emergency” has become the most “common prescription in the pharmacopoeia of statecraft” in liberal democracies.\(^9\) A broader literature on “securitization” has analyzed similar dynamics, investigating how government authorities invoke the specter of existential threats to justify exceptional measures that undermine democratic norms. As Rita Taureck has described this dynamic, “by stating that a particular referent object is threatened in its existence,” a strategic actor asserts a right to take “extraordinary measures” to ensure its survival. Securitization thus moves an issue “out of the sphere of normal politics” and into the realm of “emergency politics,” where it can be dealt with “swiftly and without the normal (democratic) rules and regulations of policy-making.”\(^9\)

We share with such critical analyses an interest in (and concern with) the challenges that catastrophic threats pose to modern government: on the one hand, to experts’ ability to assess and manage such threats; on the other hand, to mechanisms of democratic rule and distributed sovereignty. But our genealogical approach provides a different perspective on these questions. We begin from the observation that these critiques can be situated within broader problematizations of risk, security, and democracy.\(^9\) Over the last century, the issues that are now raised as problems for political or social theory have been addressed by an array of reformers, experts, and government officials as urgent practical matters. Thus, since the 1930s, technical experts and government officials have been increasingly concerned with problems of “reflexive modernization”: the appearance of threats to the very “foundations of life” that are systematically generated by modernization processes, and the difficulty of assessing these novel threats using established forms of assessment and mitigation.\(^9\) Meanwhile, a range of administrative reformers, government officials, and legal experts worried about how the increasing “normalcy” of emergency government in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century might undermine democratic norms. In this light, our strategy is not to offer another theoretical analysis
of catastrophic risk or the “state of emergency.” Rather, we examine how historically situated actors initially formulated these questions, and how their responses have shaped contemporary emergency government.

This analytical strategy points to a more differentiated understanding of our current “world of emergencies” than the sweeping diagnoses presented in much recent social and political theory. Increasingly prevalent catastrophic risks may indeed challenge existing forms of expertise and existing security mechanisms. But this does not mean that they exceed all means of technical assessment and mitigation. In the episodes we examine, technical specialists and government officials assembled new forms of expert knowledge about vulnerability, and they invented mechanisms to ensure the continuous operation of life-sustaining vital systems in the event of future disasters. Regardless of whether these mechanisms have achieved the aims for which they were designed and deployed, they have become increasingly authoritative and pervasive across many domains of contemporary life. Moreover, the provision of vital systems security by means of such mechanisms has come to be widely accepted as a central obligation of government.95 Our analysis also complicates the claim that increasingly pervasive states of emergency break down the distinction between emergency government and normal government, or that emergency decrees necessarily contain the seeds of authoritarianism. Indeed, American reformers during the Great Depression, World War II, and the early Cold War sought to invent devices and techniques of emergency government that would obviate the need for exceptional measures.

We do not mean to argue that there is no need for concern about “exceptionalism” or “securitization” in American politics. Constitutional norms are threatened by security measures in many domains; the “war on terror” and recent immigration policies provide obvious examples. Rather, the point is that it is not possible to deduce a general logic of emergency government from such examples.96 There are forms of emergency government that are compatible with liberal constitutional government, and these forms predominate in many core domains of contemporary emergency management. There are ways of anticipating and mitigating uncertain and unprecedented catastrophes that are grounded in authoritative knowledge, even if that knowledge is itself uncertain and is the subject of controversy and contestation. And there are, finally, different ways that a threat can be “securitized.” It makes a significant difference whether a particular threat is addressed by reducing the vulnerability of vital systems to disruption or by imposing disciplinary controls and extrajudicial measures that undermine
The point of analyzing these alternatives is to sharpen our discernment, to bolster our ability to assess whether particular emergency measures truly threaten our norms of government, and, perhaps, to better equip ourselves to craft a politics of emergency that better accords with our collective aspirations for the future.

The Objects of Genealogical Analysis

The last section of this introduction describes the methods of inquiry we used to construct this genealogy. In piecing together this account, we have mainly drawn on primary documents, including bureaucratic reports, memoranda, technical studies, and plans. Some of the texts we examine, such as the forty-seven-volume *United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, are relatively well known among scholars of US political and military history. Most, however, are obscure documents—in some cases, recently declassified—that were intended for narrow audiences of officials, experts, and, in some cases, policymakers. They are significant for us not because they were necessarily influential. Rather, they provide us with insight into the formation of a schema or diagram of emergency government, through which a particular range of situations was constituted as a problem that called out for certain kinds of analysis and remedial intervention. In working with these primary documents, we have examined first, the styles of reasoning through which specific domains of expert practice are defined; second, the *knowledge infrastructures* that make it possible to constitute targets of governmental intervention; and third, *sites of technical practice*, in which experts and officials confront and formulate solutions to immediate practical problems.

In describing the emergence of novel styles of reasoning, we do not mean to suggest that a domain of practice that had previously been irrational became more rational. Nor do we mean to treat the history of expert thought as the progression of ever-more accurate approximations of an objective reality. Rather, our goal is to examine the conceptual and pragmatic structure of particular forms of knowledge, and the coming-into-being of things—such as “vital systems” or “national resources”—that, as Ian Hacking puts it, “do not exist in any recognizable form” until they have become objects of expert analysis. More concretely, an analysis of styles of reasoning focuses on experts and officials whose authority is grounded in technical knowledge and formalized (and often, but not always, quantified) demonstration. Although this approach shares something with traditional intellectual
INDEX

active defense measures, 193, 244, 251, 374n39, 389n87. See also passive defense measures
Acts of God (Steinberg), 5
acts of god, policy and, 344n45
Adams, Thomas, 45
Adams, V. L., 396n104
ad hoc disaster response, 16, 281, 344n45
adjustment. See governmental adjustment
administrative devices, xii, xvii, 16–25, 33, 334; climate change response and, 340; constitutional democracy and emergency powers and, 17–25, 32; elements of, 23–24; ICAF and, 2; norms established, 6–7, 85–87, 123, 356n11; WWII mobilization planning and, 98–99. See also executive authority; faculty ratings; Office for Emergency Management (OEM); Progressive reformers; reorganization authority; resource management, material flows analysis
administrative machinery. See administrative devices
administrative readiness, 24–25; test exercises, 222–223, 225, 237, 241, 267, 379n128, 382n180. See also test exercises
administrative readiness, ODM and, 23, 244, 256–268, 303, 321, 364n207; defined, 24–25, 385n33; emergency action documents and, 286; emergency action steps project, 263–265, 267, 386n53–54, 387n55, 57; essential wartime functions analysis, 261–263, 267; executive authority issues, 257–261, 268–275; NPA study and, 275, 389n91; Operation Alert exercises and, 265; Paul and, 271, 278, 279, 285, 384n30, 389n91; wartime agencies, creation and functions, 257–263. See also Operation Alert exercise (1955); preparedness
administrative state, term, 344n53
AEC. See Atomic Energy Commission (AEC)
aerial bombardment. See target selection
Agamben, Giorgio, 27
aiming point analysis, 371n35; by AEC, 206; analog methods, 142, 163–166, 169, 170–171; computerized methods, 142, 178; by EOU, 75, 79; in industrial planning, 205; in local planning, 170–171, 184; NSRB on, 184, 205, 206, 221, 222, 235–236, 379n124. See also damage assessment; target selection
Air Annex to the Victory program, 71
Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at, 192; instruction and lectures, 14, 39, 41, 61, 63–70; target selection and, 74, 80, 140–141, 160, 353n95, 367n49. See also system vulnerability analysis; target selection
air force, establishment of US, 63, 68–71, 79–80, 82, 367n56
Air Force Management Analysis Directorate, 371n144
Air Force mobilization specialists, 173–174
air intelligence, 35, 41, 61, 177–179, 221, 307, 325–326; under Army's intelligence service, 69, 70; event modeling and, 177–178; Hughes, 70–71, 74–75, 79; New Deal economists in, 15, 60, 71–79; Salant, 60, 75–76, 354n142, 358n66; SVB, 154–159, 166, 325, 367n55, 56; USBS on importance of updating, 82, 154; USSBS post-war analysis and, 80–81, 82; vulnerability specialists in, 142, 180, 186. See also Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at; area analysis; Coker, Joseph; Enemy Objectives Unit
air intelligence (continued)
(EOU); industrial analysis; Joint Target Group (JTG); Strategic Vulnerability Branch (SVB, Army Air Corps); target selection
Air Intelligence Directorate (US Air Force), 157, 163, 325
airplanes: industrial production issues, 64, 103, 105, 113, 116, 173–174; invention of, 39–40; as weapons, 62–63, 143, 353n91
"Airplanes in National Defense" (Mitchell), 62
airpower strategists, 166–168, 192, 374n37; area analysis by, 142, 160, 162, 163, 369n84; Douhet, 40, 140, 141, 143, 353n91; enemy industrial production and, 152–159; Fairchild, 14, 65–68, 79, 80, 353n106; George, Harold (Hal), 61, 70; Hansell, 63–64, 67–70, 79, 160, 353n19, 367n49, 368n80; Hughes, 70–71, 74–75, 79; LeMay, 79, 160, 196; Mitchell, Billy, 40, 62–63, 70, 140, 141, 143; precision bombing, 80, 140–141; Sherman, 39–41, 62, 64, 77; system vulnerability analysis by, 15, 142. See also Lowe, James T.; target selection
air targeting. See target selection
Air Warfare (Sherman), 39–41
Air War Plans Division-1 (AWPD-1), 68–71
alert planning (NSRB), 237–239, 241, 382n180. See also Operation Alert exercise (1955); test exercises
Allied Combined Bomber Offensive, 79
all-outers (mobilization planners), 101–103, 106–111, 112
aluminum industry, 103, 105, 116, 121, 152
American Construction Council, 350n51
American Economic Review, 199
amortization. See rapid amortization; taxation
Anderson, Frederick L., 79
Anshen, Melvin, 84, 105, 116, 122, 135, 384n21, 389n91
anticipatory knowledge, 20, 24–25, 29, 39n120; climate change, xix, 333, 337–340, 364n8; flexibility in, 85; mobilization planning, 102–103, 106–107, 135; pandemic response, 335–337, 398n14–16. See also administrative readiness; casualty assessments; damage assessment; expertise; knowledge infrastructure; models and simulations; nuclear preparedness; postattack industrial rehabilitation; preparedness; resource management; science of flows; target selection; test exercises
Archambault, Raoul, Jr., 280–281, 282, 39n120
area analysis, 140–141, 159–173; blast damage, 142, 159, 160–161, 163, 164–165; in civil defense planning, 168–173; industrial analysis linked with, 142, 159, 161, 369n84, 380n150; in JTG, 160–161, 369n84, 85; maps in, 159–160, 161–162, 163–166; in SVB, 157, 166–168. See also air intelligence; damage assessment; dispersal; target selection
Army: intelligence service, 69, 70; resistance to air force creation, 63, 69. See also military; Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG)
Army Corps of Engineers, 67; Manhattan Project control by, 369n90, 376n66
Army-Navy Munitions Board, 103, 111, 121, 359n83, 362n177
Arnold, Henry "Hap," 69–70, 124, 160, 367n57, 368n81
atomic attack. See nuclear preparedness
Atomic Bomb, The (Atomic Scientists of Chicago), 196
"Atomic Bomb Explosions—Effects on an American City" (Lapp), 182–184
Atomic Energy Commission (AEC), 163, 206–207; creation of, 369n90, 376n66; Effects of Atomic Weapons, 379n124; postattack functions of, 236; on radiation effects, 298, 301. See also nonmilitary defense; nuclear preparedness
Atomic Scientists of Chicago, 374nn35–40; Bulletin of Atomic Scientists, 182, 195–196, 197, 211, 226–227
atomic weapons. See nuclear weapons
attack simulations: enemy attack patterns, 201, 312–313; feasibility testing and, 201, 205, 315; mobilization plan testing, 180–181; by National Damage Assessment Center, 309, 311–314, 331; by ODM, 180, 394n54; one-shot, 312–313; randomness in, 178; resource management and, 294, 311–316, 322; by SRI, 394n54; war games, 15, 179, 255, 265–266, 267, 277, 379n128. See also computer simulation; damage assessment; models and simulations
Attorney General, 272–273
Augur, Tracy, 207, 381n159
Austria, 91
avian flu, xiv
AWPD-1 (Air War Plans Division-1), 68–71
balance of power, 24
balance sheet planning, 99, 108; budgetary shortfalls, 109–111; civilian

Baldwin, Hanson, 187, 375n50
Ball, George, 80–81
Barnett, Harold, 75
Baruch, Bernard, 225
basic human needs, 5
Bassie, V. Lewis, 60, 352n81
BDSA (Business and Defense Services Administration), 263, 310, 322–325, 386n51
Beck, Ulrich, 9, 26–27, 340, 346n78; Risk Society, 341n2, 346n81, 347n87
Bedsheet report (MPAC), 254–255, 384n25
Beers, Barnett W., 279, 281–282, 373n28
Beers, Barnett W., OPMG report, 193–194, 271, 374n30, 391n125
Berlin Blockade, 207
Biddle, Eric, 379n128
Biden, Joseph, xviii
Binger, Walter, 378n109
biopolitics: biopolitical government, regularization and, 350n50; biopolitical modernity, 11, 13–14, 331, 332, 335; biopolitical security, 5, 13; Foucault on, 10–11, 331; reflexive, 8, 10–16, 41–42, 335. See also health system; manpower, as resource category; population security; population survival; vital systems security
Blaisdell, Thomas, 112
blast damage. See damage assessment
blockade tactics, 13, 40, 143
Blue Book (NSRB), 184–185, 225–227, 295, 373n24, 379n136
blueprint planning, 25, 129, 287. See also mobilization planning
Board of Economic Warfare, 59
bomb damage. See damage assessment
Bomb Damage Problem, The (Interindustry Research Program), 176–181, 342n16, 371n135, 136, 384n27
Bombing Encyclopedia of the World, 156–159, 368n70
bomb targets. See target selection
Borden, William, 372n14
bottlenecks, transportation, 46, 66, 100, 199, 202
bottlenecks and shortages: balance sheet planning to avoid, 128; BDSA assessment, 323; dispersal to avoid, 212; industrial vulnerability and, 103, 113, 146–147, 212, 230, 366n29; during Korean War, 131, 201, 236; of manpower, 291, 315; in pandemic response, xvii–xviii, 335–336; of survival resources, 317–318; target selection and, 62, 66, 76, 82, 100; during WWII, 20, 43, 67, 349n13, 18, 353n107; during WWII, 100, 104–105, 106, 113, 114, 146–147, 201, 366n26. See also industrial vulnerability assessment; resource management
bridges, 64, 151, 319
Bringante, John E., 104, 109, 110, 111, 114, 360n98
Brinkley, David, 133, 349n33, 356n18, 358n56
Britain: American military products purchased by, 104, 359n86; British military, 62, 74, 79; information exchange between US and, 108; resource management and, 108–109, 110; war games in, 379n128
British Emergency Powers Act (1920), 20
British Ministry of Economic Warfare, 74–75
British Supply Council, 104, 108
Brodie, Bernard, 372n14, 374n45, 375n51
Brookings Institution, 125
Brownell, Herbert, 272
Brownlow, Louis, 88, 93–94
budget issues: airpower advocacy and, 174, 370n14; balance sheet advocacy and, 109–111; defense spending, Korean War, 130; fallout shelters, 317; New Deal planning and, 133; procurement and, 102, 103–104, 174; stockpiling programs, 103, 297, 299, 304, 319, 325, 330, 359n84, 396n115; systems analysis approach to budgeting, 362n157, 366n41
Bull, Harold, 204, 252
Bull Board report (on civil defense), 204, 217–218, 252–253, 375n60, 61, 383n12
Bull Committee (on continental defense), 252–253, 266, 383n12
Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 182, 195–196, 197, 211, 226–227. See also Atomic Scientists of Chicago
Buna-S (synthetic rubber), 148
Bureau of Municipal Research, 88
Bureau of Public Roads, 52
Bureau of Statistics, 101
Bureau of the Budget, 95–96, 175
Bureau of the Census, 263
Business and Defense Services Administration (BDSA), 263, 310, 322–325, 386n51, 397n131
business cycles, 50–52, 350n44
calculative rationality, 26
Calhoun, Craig, 25
California wildfires, 333
capitalism, 209–210, 213, 347n90
Capital Parks Commission, 349n32
capital theory, 77
Capitol, US, 206. See also Washington, DC
Carbon Democracy (Mitchell), 351n64
Carter, Jimmy, 9
Carter administration, 333
Castle Bravo H-Bomb test (1954), 298, 393n20
casualty assessments: Bomb Damage Problem on, 179–180; casualty maps, 173, 221–222; by Continental Defense Planning Group, 274; Covid-19 deaths, 337; medical stockpiling resource evaluation based on, 297, 330; by NDAC, 291–293, 326; nuclear weapons’ increasing power, 300; in Operation Alert, 276, 298–299; in Plan D-Minus, 287–288; in supply-requirement analysis, 318, 324–325. See also damage assessment; health resources; population survival
catastrophe modeling. See attack simulations; computer simulation; models and simulation; test exercises; vulnerability assessment, models and simulations for
catastrophism rhetoric, 340
CDUA (Civil Defense Urban Analysis), 168–173, 221
Center for Strategic and International Studies, 8
Central Statistical Board, 56, 59
Central Task Force (NSRB), 239–242, 381n75, 382n178, 180, 183
certificates of necessity, 209–210
chain of command, 234, 231, 269–275; Attorney General on legal issues, 272–273. See also responsibility and authority issues
Charles, Daniel, 369n87
Chazeau, Melvin de, 120
checklists, 129, 257, 263; emergency action steps project and, 264, 386n54; in Plan D-Minus, 288; for test exercises, 266
chemical industry, 318
Chicago, Illinois, 42–44; civilian mobilization planning in, 223–224, 235–236; postattack industrial rehabilitation and, 235–236; power utilities in, 152
Chicago Plan Commission and Chicago Plan (1909), 42–44, 45
Churchill, Winston, 110
cities. See regional planning; urban vulnerability assessment
City X (civil defense study), 182–184
Civil Defense National Survival. See Holifield Committee (House Subcommittee on Government Operations)
civil defense planning, xiv–xv, xvii, 33–34, 341n6. See also nonmilitary defense
Civil Defense Urban Analysis (CDUA), 168–173, 221
Civil Defense Vulnerability Manual, 168, 369n101
civil engineers, 42–44, 45. See also regional planning; urbanization
civilian authority, military governance techniques used in, 184–185. See also military-civilian authority issues
Civilian Mobilization Office (NSRB), 219–220, 225, 237, 379n128; Health Resources Division, 220–221, 379n122
civilian mobilization planning, NSRB’s role in, 217–229, 363n183, 185; aiming point analysis and, 221, 379n124; Blue Book and, 184–185, 225–227, 295, 373n24, 379n136; calls for action; impatience with planning, 225, 379n134, 136; Central Task Force and, 239–242, 381n75, 382n178–180; civilian protection and relief, 188, 208, 217–219, 225; emergency resource management conceptualization, 219–224; federal-state relations, 208, 217–218, 219–220, 221–227, 379n136; health resources evaluation, 220–221, 294–295, 392n6; local planning guidance, 220–224; ODM merger ensures continuation, 249; PAIR and, 228–229; political challenges, 224–227, 379n136; resilience and, 380n53; Special Security Programs Office, 227, 228, 382n183, 383n13; test exercises for governmental readiness, 222–223, 225, 379n128; Truman administration direction, 168, 219, 225, 243, 244, 364n207, 379n134. See also National Security Resources Board (NSRB); nonmilitary defense, NSRB’s role in; postattack industrial rehabilitation
Civilian Production Administration, 110
civilian protection and relief, 188, 208, 217–219, 225, 304, 316. See also population survival; postattack survival requirements

civilians, effects on. See casualty assessments; damage assessment; health system; population survival; postattack survival requirements; radioactive fallout

civil liberties, 29–30

Clark, John Maurice, 50, 52–53, 56, 58, 350n58, 380n150

classical sovereignty, threats to, 10–11

Clifford, Clark, 123

climate change, xix, 333, 337–340, 364n8

climate emergency, 339, 340

Climate Mobilization (advocacy group), 339–340

CMP (Controlled Materials Plan), 111–112, 121–123, 124–125, 132

coal, 43, 100. See also oil and fuel systems; power and electricity systems

Coale, Ansley, 199–203, 375nn50, 51, 397n141

Coker, Joseph: on area bombing, 162–163; on attack simulations, 312, 313; career trajectory, 325–326; Horton and, 307, 325–326, 331; Kahn and, 396n108; on ODM’s computerized damage assessment work, 307, 308, 326; on power systems, 355n147; on radioactive fallout, 395n92; on target selection, 72, 154, 158, 354n123. See also economics of target selection; National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center)

Cold War: administrative readiness during, 24; civil defense planning during, xiv–xv, xvii, 33–34, 341n6; Gaither Committee and, 316, 319; preparedness and, 185–186. See also civilian mobilization planning, NSRB’s role in; nuclear preparedness; Soviet Union


Commerce Department. See Department of Commerce

commissarial dictatorship, 21–22. See Schmitt, Carl

Committee on Administrative Management (1936–1937), 23–24, 93–97, 344n55, 357n47, 358n52

Committee on Atomic Energy of the Research and Development Board, 376n66

Committee on Control of Flow of Materials, 120–123

Committee on Interindustry Economics, 175

Committee on Social Trends, 90, 356n25

Commodity flows, 56

communication systems, 12–13, 149, 207, 232, 286, 288. See also vital systems security

communism, NSC 68 study on, 130

community support. See essential services computers (human “computers” in data handling), 118–119

computer simulation, 7, 173–181; balance sheet planning, 326–329; event modeling, 177–178, 292; feasibility testing and, 173–175; Gaither Committee and, 317; NDAC models, 312–314, 324, 326–328; Project SCOOP, development of, 173–175, 369n12, 370n113–114; resource management and, 176, 250, 292, 294; UNIVAC and, 175, 177, 263, 308, 394n54; vulnerability assessment development, 15, 25, 142–143, 173, 180–181, 369n112, 370n113–114. See also damage assessment, computerization of; models and simulations

Conference on Post-Attack Industrial Rehabilitation (NSRB), 235–237, 381n58–160


Connery, Robert Howe, 93, 125

conservative criticism: of executive authority, 9, 87, 92, 93; of national security state, 130, 134–135; of Roosevelt-era changes to reorganization authority, 96, 99–100, 123, 135, 357n35, 358n60; of welfare state, 133, 134

conservative libertarian economics, 380n153
constitutional democracy, emergency powers and, 8, 17–29, 32–33, 83, 85–87, 334; Attorney General on legal questions of resource coordination, 272–273; Beck on, 19, 22, 340, 345n67; climate change and, 340; garrison state critiques, 130, 131, 187, 208; Karl on, 358n51; martial law declaration, 251, 276, 282–283; Merriam and Progressive reformers on, 89–91; OEM and, 85; Plan D-Minus and, 287; Rossiter on, 17, 19, 22, 340, 345n67; Schmitt on, 20–22, 345nn63, 64, 67, 358n60; scholarship on, 20–22, 26–28. See also dictatorship; executive authority; reorganization

Constitutional Dictatorship (Rossiter), 17, 21, 22, 86, 346n71, 357nn32, 35, 359n68

construction industry, 51, 52

continental defense, 244, 251–253

Continental Defense Planning Group, 274

continuity of government. See government continuity

controlled materials allocation plans, 115–123, 126, 199, 236; CMP, 111–112, 121–122, 124–125, 132; PRP, 116–120, 122, 360n89, 361nn140, 145, 150, 362n156; vertical control of plan, 120–123, 310; WPB data collection for, 113, 116–120. See also Production Requirements Plan (PRP); resource management

Controlled Materials Plan (CMP), 111–112, 121–122, 124–125, 132, 362n157

Cooper, Christopher, 343n28

copper industry, 103, 121

Council of Economic Advisers, 175

Covid-19 pandemic, xvii–xviii, 333, 335–337, 398nn14–16

critical infrastructure, xi, 13, 14, 240, 336; protection of, xiii, xviii, 4, 334, 337, 343n30. See also essential services

critical target areas, 215, 230, 296–298, 301, 392n12. See also dispersal; target selection

Critique of Security (Neocleous), 27–28

Cuff, Robert, 111–112, 128, 130, 135

Curley, Tyler, 356n10

Currie, Lauchlin, 56–57, 60, 75, 352nn72, 73, 80

cushion, 76–77, 80, 82–83, 155, 157–158, 192, 199. See also depth; resilience; substitution

Cutler, Robert, 262, 396n104


industrial production; industrial vulnerability assessment; vulnerability assessment
damage assessment specialists, 308, 311, 317.
See also Horton, H. Burke
Dantzig, George, 174, 370n13
data collection and analysis. See knowledge infrastructure
Dauber, Michele Landis, 16
DeCoursey, Elbert, 291
Defense against Enemy Action Directed at Civilians (OPMG report), 193–194, 217, 373n24
defense expenditures. See military spending
Defense Mobilization Orders (DMO), 260–261, 264, 385n39
Defense Production Administration, 132, 235
Delano, Frederic, 43, 45, 47, 90, 349nn8, 32
deleagoratory statutes, 23–24, 133, 268, 346n71; chain of command coordination issues and, 272; in Congress, 357n32; executive authority, 357nn32, 37; in Korean War mobilization planning, 131–132; in New Deal planning, 92, 357nn35, 37; by NSRB, 238; in nuclear preparedness, 238, 243; in ODM’s administrative readiness plans, 260–261, 269, 303, 321, 364n207; in WWII mobilization planning, 98–99, 103, 106, 123, 269. See also administrative device; executive authority; reorganization authority
Dembitz, Lewis, 199
demobilization, of wartime agencies and offices, 86, 87, 123, 248, 251; OPMG studies, 189–193, 203–204, 377n96
democracy. See constitutional democracy, emergency powers and
Department of Agriculture: inventorying by, 324; Plan D-Minus on, 288–289; rationing, 270, 289; wartime operations of, 258, 260, 265, 270, 288–289. See also food supply
Department of Civil Defense, legislation proposing, 396n105
Department of Commerce, 56, 265, 351n71; BDSA and, 263, 310, 322–325, 397n131; Bombing Encyclopedia data and, 156; Facilities Protection Board, 214, 377n98; IEB, 214, 215, 310, 377n98–99; Industrial Economics Division, 100; industrial vulnerability assessment, 156, 177; on Operation Alert (1957), 322
Department of Defense, 241, 363n180, 367n56; damage assessment work by, 308; wartime operations of, 258, 284–285, 288
Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 263, 324
Department of Homeland Security (DHS), xii–xiv, 4, 333, 336
Department of State, military and foreign relations oversight by, 258
Department of the Interior, 288, 324
depth, 76–77, 80, 82–83, 155, 157–158, 199.
See also cushion; resilience; substitution despotism, 345n63
Detroit, Michigan, 152
Dickinson, Edward T.: emergency action steps project and, 386n54; on Korean War mobilization, 132, 208, 364n207; PAIR leadership by, 235, 239, 241; on WPB, 112
Dickinson, Matthew J., 93, 357n35, 358n56
dictatorship, 92–93, 345n63; defined, 21–22; martial law and, 280; reorganization controversy, 87, 92, 97–98, 340, 357n33, 358n56. See also constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; executive authority; reorganization authority; Schmitt, Carl
Dictatorship (Schmitt), 20–22, 345n63, 64, 391n120
Diner, Stephen, 356n15
Directorate of Intelligence, 368n70
Directorate of Management Analysis, 368n70
Disaster Experts, The (Knowles), 5
disasters. See natural disasters
dispersal (continued) 
administration and, 210, 212–213, 215, 237–238; urban, 184–185, 186, 195, 196, 200, 374n34. See also government dispersal; industrial dispersal; nonmilitary defense; passive defense measures 
distributed preparedness, xiv, xvi, 23, 24, 32, 239–242, 362n160; climate change and, 338; Emergency Action Task Force and, 284; martial law and, 251; nonmilitary defense and, 218, 378n107; NSRB and, 131, 188, 225, 241; ODM influence on, 34, 260–262, 264, 304; OEP functions, 333; pandemic response and, xviii; reorganization authority and, 97; Truman administration and, 131 
distribution of supplies. See resource management; stockpiling programs, essential supplies 
D’Olier, Frank, 80 
domestic preparedness, 3, 32, 34, 35, 168, 271 
Donovan, William J., 72 
Dorwart, Jeffrey M., 125 
Douhet, Giulio, 40, 140, 141, 353n91 
DPA (Defense Production Act, 1950), xviii, 130–132, 210, 286–287, 336, 389n86 
Dunaway, Edward, 174, 370n13 
Duncan, Joseph, 54–56 
DUSTY (NDAC computer modeling routine), 312 
Eberharter, Herman P., 210 
Eberstadt, Ferdinand, 121, 124–125, 362n177, 179 
Eberstadt report, 124–127, 128 
Eccles, Mariner, 352n72 
economics of resource management. See balance sheet planning; resource management; science of flows 
economics of target selection, 2, 15, 72–80, 232, 325, 344n40, 355n145, 397n141; damage assessment in, 74, 76–77, 80–81, 142; “economics of target selection,” term use, 354n123; EOU and, 74–75, 76, 77, 80, 354n142–143; expertise in, 72, 80, 141–142; influence on domestic vulnerability assessment, 198; system vulnerability analysis in, 61. See also target selection economy, national. See national economy; New Deal Economics 
economy of force, 40, 64 
Eden, Lynn, 165–166, 367n56, 368n58 
Edwards, Paul, 31, 364n8. See also knowledge infrastructure 
Effects of Atomic Weapons (AEC), 379n124 
Eggan, Fred, 374n35 
Eighth Air Force (London), 74, 79 
Eisenhower, Dwight D.: declares martial law during Operation Alert, 276, 277–283, 340, 390n102, 111; on test exercises, 266 
Eisenhower administration, 227; chain of command coordination issues and, 271–272; continental defense measures instituted, 244, 251–252; mobilization planning during, 180; NSRB-ODM merger during, 249, 383n5; response to Gaither report, 320; electricity. See power and electricity systems 
Elliott, William Y., 252, 383n9 
emergency action steps project (ODM), 263–265, 267, 386n53–54, 387n55, 57 
emergency declarations, 19–20, 25–28, 29, 131, 357n36, 359n68; climate emergencies, 339; labor unrest and, 20, 345n58. See also constitutional democracy, emergency powers and 
emergency government, 1–8, 20–25, 28–30, 333; climate change and, 338–339; diagram of, 242–244, 330–331, 332, 337; ICAF volumes on, 1–3; political technology of, 8, 18, 21–24, 86–87, 99; Schmitt on, 20–22. See also constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; New Deal Planning; preparedness 
emergency government, elements of, xix, xvi, 2, 5–6, 18–25, 87, 88–91, 123, 125, 356n15. See also administrative devices; executive authority; expertise; knowledge infrastructure; planning procedures, mobilization and preparedness; regulatory devices 
emergency government, genealogy of, 5–8, 28–29, 332, 334; climate change and, 339; damage assessment, 180; genealogy of resilience, 343n28, 380n153; NSRB and, 185. See also genealogical method 
emergency government organization, xv–xvi, 127, 129, 258, 294; OEM as model for, 84–87. See also nonmilitary defense; Progressive reformers; reorganization authority; resource management; responsibility and authority issues
emergency management, xiv–xvi, 2–5, 29, 33–35, 287, 333–334. See also Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA); Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); National Security Resources Board (NSRB); Office for Emergency Management (OEM); Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM); vital systems security

Emergency Management of the National Economy (ICAF), 1–3, 341n1, 342n3

emergency powers, use of. See constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; executive authority

emergency preparedness, 2, 4–5, 8, 228–229, 249–250, 256; emergency government redefined as, 124, 294; as NSRB statutory mandate, 238–239, 243; organizational shifts and failures, 16, 32–33, 333–334. See also Mobilization Plan D-Minus; mobilization planning; nuclear preparedness; Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM); Office of Emergency Planning (later Office of Emergency Preparedness); passive defense measures; vital systems security

emergency relief planning, 16; FCDA and, 261, 273–274, 284–285, 299–300, 308; local organizing, 193, 217, 221, 226–227, 270–271, 274, 300, 333, 388n77; manpower as resource, 302–303; military-civilian authority issues, 270, 273–275, 393n19. See also administrative readiness; emergency resource management; essential services; federal-state relations, emergency relief planning; Mobilization Plan D-Minus; mobilization planning; nonmilitary defense; nuclear preparedness; responsibility and authority issues; stockpiling programs, essential supplies; vulnerability assessment

emergency resource management, 7, 243, 249–250; attack simulations and, 294, 311–316, 322; Bedsheet report on, 254–255, 384n25; business cycle relationship, 50–51; computer simulation in, 176, 250, 292, 294; emergency action documents on, 284–287, 391n134; emergency relief, tension between, 334; federal-state relations in, 294, 295–296; FEMA and, 333; Interagency Committee on Essential Survival Items and, 305–306, 314, 394n44; martial law and, 277; military-civilian relations in, 277; MPAC and, 302–303; by NSRB/Office of National Mobilization, 257–258; nuclear preparedness and, 180–181, 188; ODM employs national resource surveys, 322; ODM-FCDA merger, 294; OEP and, 332–333; in pandemic response, xviii–xix, 335–336, 398n16; Plan D-Minus and, 283–290; population security and, 331; priority ratings for industrial production, xviii, 104–105, 116, 118, 131, 360n89; Project SCOOP and, 370n114; PRP influence, 116; rationing, 233, 270, 289; regional planning in system vulnerability analysis, 45; technical experts’ authority in, 105–107; technology and, 8–9. See also balance sheet planning; bottlenecks and shortages; controlled materials allocation plans; feasibility testing; food supply; health resources; housing and shelter; inventory of resource data; National Security Resources Board (NSRB); nonmilitary defense; Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM); Office of War Resources (wartime name of ODM); oil and fuel systems; population survival; power and electricity systems; stockpiling; water systems

emergency services, 221–222; Bomb Damage Problem on, 179–180; nonmilitary defense and, 170, 172–173. See also essential services

Emmerich, Herbert, 88, 91, 93, 97, 125, 358n63; on OEM, 84, 359n69

Enemy Objectives Unit (EOU), 74–82, 355nn149, 157; target selection and, 74–75, 76, 77, 80, 354nn140, 142–143. See also air intelligence

energy. See power and electricity systems

Energy Resources and the National Economy (NRPB study), 54

Engelhart, George, 144–149, 365n17, 366n26, 373n20

England. See Britain

EOU. See Enemy Objectives Unit (EOU)

essential functions, of emergency agencies, 261–263, 267, 385n43, 386nn46, 49

essential services, 238, 267, 334, 381n70, 385n43, 386nn46, 51; Bomb Damage Problem on, 177; dispersal and, 202–203, 205, 212; essential survival items, 293, 301–306, 319, 322–323, 335–336; facility ratings in, 149–152, 192; Gaither Committee on, 318–319; health services in civilian mobilization planning, 220–22; NSRB evaluation, 188, 385n43; Operation Alert
essential services (continued)
and, 276–277; OPMG and, 190, 191–192; in pandemic response, xviii, 336; SRI report on postattack industrial rehabilitation, 230–232, 233. See also critical infrastructure; stockpiling programs, essential supplies

Europe and European Union (EU), 14, 108; Allied Combined Bomber Offensive, 79; government in, 27–28, 90. See also Britain; Germany

European war summary (USSBS), 80–81 evacuation plans, 172–173, 190, 297; vs. mass shelter proposals, 316–317. See also dispersal; housing and shelter

event modeling. See computer simulation; models and simulations

Ewald, François, 26–27

exceptionalism, scholarly research on, 29 executive authority, xvii, 20–21; congressional debates, 91–93, 96–97, 99, 103–104, 123, 133, 251, 357nn32, 47; conservative criticism, 9, 87, 92–93, 97; defensive agencies creation and, 359n69; delegatory statute for, 357nn32, 37; dictatorial power critiques, 87, 92–93, 97; DPA and, xvi, 130; emergency action documents as standby executive orders, 284–287; emergency action steps project on, 264; emergency orders assigning emergency responsibilities, 385n39; emergency orders by Truman on alert planning, 238–239; executive order to protect national defense materials during WWII, 143–144; expansion of, 133, 344n53; Hoover administration, 344n53; interagency committees for recommending actions of, 241; judicial law controversy, 276, 279–283, 391nn125, 127; national survival obligations, 272–273, 281; Nixon administration, 333; ODM creation through, 131; ODM examination of problems of, 268–275; in pandemic response, xviii; Progressive reformers on, 87, 91–98; Rossiter on, 248, 251, 346n71, 357n32; Schmitt on, 21; Truman administration, 123; War Powers Act, 23, 129, 130, 359n69; WPB creation, 112; WWII mobilization planning and, 98–111. See also administrative devices; administrative readiness; constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; reorganization authority; reorganization authority, Roosevelt administration

Executive Order 10421, 378n102 expertise, 29, 31–32, 72; Committee on Administrative Management on, 93, 95–96; controversy and, 32; damage assessment specialists, 308, 311, 317; Kaysen on, 141, 142; Merriam on, 89, 90, 93; Progressive reformers on, 87–89; risk avoidance and, 26–27; vulnerability expertise, 13–15, 34, 141–143, 342n16. See also air intelligence; airpower strategists; mobilization specialists; science of flows; vulnerability expertise

extinction events, 9

Facilities Protection Board (Interagency Committee on Internal Security), 214, 377n98

facility ratings: Bull report on, 252; for dispersal analysis, 209, 213–215, 377n95; for essential services, 149–152, 192; IEB critical facilities list, 214, 215, 310, 377n98–99; for military-industrial production, 144–149, 192, 373n20; priority ratings, xviii, 104–105, 111, 116, 131, 360n89. See also priority ratings for industrial production; resource evaluation


Farish, Matthew, 185

feasibility testing: of Air Force mobilization plans, 179, 180; attack simulations and, 201, 205, 315; by BDSA, 310; computerization in, 173–176, 306; by ODM, 322, 330; ongoing influence of, 123, 322, 363n187; stockpile programs and, 293–294, 315. See also balance sheet planning; expertise; knowledge infrastructure

feasibility testing, WWII mobilization planning, 99, 112–116, 123, 310, 321, 330, 363n187; balance sheets and, 114, 115, 116, 128; Committee on Feasibility (WPB), 112–115, 120; New Deal economists on, 60, 111, 115, 361n134; by NSRB, 128, 175; OMB and, 112–115; in Project SCOOP, 175–176; Victory Program and, 110, 113. See also mobilization planning, WWII

Federal Civil Defense Act (1950), 130, 226, 227, 373n24, 379n136, 380n142, 391n134; on coordination of emergency relief, 273–274; DPA, compared, 389n86

Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA), 33–34, 227, 235, 379n136, 380n142; damage assessment work by,
INDEX 427

308, 394n54, 396n109; Defense Mobilization Order to, 260–261; emergency relief and, 241, 261, 273–274, 284–285, 299–300, 308; functions and authority of, 236, 241, 260, 263, 279, 283, 284–285, 382n180; on limited martial law, 390n100; local test exercises run by, 241, 382n180; mass shelter recommendations by, 317; merges with ODM, 294, 304, 320–321; on NSRB Central Task Force, 239; packaged disaster hospitals, funding for, 299; resource inventorying data, 311; stockpiling essential supplies and, 294, 296–301, 392n14. See also nonmilitary defense; Operation Alert exercise (1955); stockpiling programs, essential supplies

Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), xiv, xviii, 4, 24, 130; creation of, 9, 333; regional subdivisions of, 388n77 federalism. See federal-state relations

Federal Power Commission, 67, 353n106

federalism.

See also governors; local government; responsibility and authority issues

Federal Works Agency, 207

Fesler, James, 1–2, 19, 112, 124, 342n2; on Committee on Administrative Management, 93, 344n55

Finan, William, 320

fire damage assessment, 160, 164–165, 172, 178–179, 207, 368n81. See also damage assessment; radioactive fallout

Flemming, Arthur, 249, 266, 301, 321, 382n183; on authority and coordination for emergency relief, 269, 271–272, 303; on balance sheet for survival, 301, 304; on damage assessment, 306–308, 310, 311; on emergency resource management, 258, 286, 303–304, 305, 306, 307–308, 310; forms Interagency Committee on Essential Survival Items, 305–306; on martial law and Operation Alert, 278, 280, 283, 390n107; on mobilization planning assumptions, 253–254, 257, 384n16, 385n31; MPAC and, 254, 256, 303, 307; on nuclear preparedness, 3, 269, 303–304; on ODM functions, 256, 258, 385n34; on organizations’ essential functions, 260, 261, 386n46, 49; on Plan D-Minus, 256, 257, 303; on stockpiling issues, 303–304, 305, 306. See also Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM)

flow charts, 230

flow of materials. See emergency resource management; resource management, material flows analysis; science of flows

food supply, 288–289, 324, 331–332; coordination of emergency relief, 270, 274–275, 285; emergency action steps and, 265; stockpiling and, 305, 317; system vulnerability analysis and, 60, 66; War Food Administration, 258, 260, 270; WWI shortages, 20, 43. See also Department of Agriculture; emergency resource management; stockpiling programs, essential supplies; vital systems security

Ford, Henry, 44

foreign intelligence. See air intelligence

forms of security, compared (table), 13

Forrestal, James, 187–188, 218, 219, 377n96

Foucault, Michel, 342n14, 347n98, 350n50; on biopolitics, 10–11, 331; on problematization, 348n102, 107

Fowler, John G., 158–159, 368n78

Fox, Bertrand, 135, 384n21

Frank, Adam, 337–338

Friedrich, Carl, 125

Full Employment Act (1945), 133

Funigielo, Philip, 319

Gaither, Rowan, 316


Galbraith, John Kenneth, 57–59, 60, 80–81, 352n76

Galison, Peter, 369n100

Gallagher, Hubert, 271, 279

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Garrison, Dee, 387n61

Garrison state (Lasswell), 187

garrison state, critiques, 130, 131, 187, 208

gasoline production, 159

Gates, Bill, 337

genealogical method, 5–8, 28–29, 332, 343n34, 347n98; genealogy of resilience, 343n28; research methods, 30–35. See also emergency government, genealogy of

Gentile, Gian, 368n80, 369n84

geographic information systems (GIS), 15, 34, 181

George, Edwin B., 25, 108, 110, 134–135, 360n101; on Gaither Committee, 317; materials control program and, 120, 121; on MPAC, 254–255; on Requirements Committee, 117, 120; on vertical analysis in vulnerability assessment, 310; on WPB, 112, 117, 120

George, Harold (Hal), 61, 70

Germany, 22, 74, 89, 91, 345n67, 355n147; air intelligence on, 58, 69, 70–71, 79, 353n119; resilience of industrial economy, 81–82, 163, 188–189

Gilman, Nils, 340

Global War Plan, 267

Gordon, Lincoln, 120, 135, 384n21

Gorrie, Jack, 235, 238, 263, 376n81
governmental adjustment, 19, 94, 132–133, 248, 358n51; Merriam on, 18, 21, 88–91, 125. See also reorganization authority, Roosevelt administration
government continuity, 186, 200, 267, 375n51; Bull report on, 252; climate change and, 338; delegation plans, 238; dispersal and, 202–203; early NSRB reports on, 205–207; essential functions for, 261–262; NSRB alert planning, 237–239; NSRB PAIR program and, 237–239, 240, 243, 249, 254, 381n165, 170; Rossiter on, 247–248; state of preparedness and, 233–234. See also emergency government
governmental dispersal, 188, 202–203, 204, 205–207, 247, 377n83; alert planning and relocation, 237–238; relocation sites for Washington operations, 206–238, 261, 267–268, 386n44. See also dispersal
governors, 202, 271–272, 284, 285, 336, 398n15; martial law and, 275, 279–280. See also federal-state relations

Gray, Gordon, 321, 322, 332

Great Depression, 3, 5–6, 88, 91, 380n150. See also under New Deal

Great Transformation, The (Polanyi), 351n64

Greenbaum, Edward S., 366n26
greenhouse gas reduction, 339
ground zeros, 140, 164, 170, 177–178, 292, 371n136, 373n28; in attack simulations, 312–313. See also damage assessment

Guglielmo, Mark, 355n145

Gulick, Luther, 17, 88, 93, 98, 112, 388n77

Gullion, Allen W., 144, 365n15

Hacking, Ian, 6, 11, 30, 331, 342n14

Haig, Robert Murray, 45, 46, 47

Hansell, Haywood, 63–64, 67–70, 79, 353n119, 367n49; precision bombing campaign and, 160, 368n80

Harris, Innis, 257, 266, 322; on Operation Alert, 276, 278, 304–305, 316

Hayes, George T., 229

health resources, 294–301, 303–306, 392n10, 393n19; BDSA and, 324–325; Gaither Committee on, 317–318; in NSRB civilian mobilization planning, 220–221, 294–296, 392n6; packaged disaster hospitals, 297, 299, 325, 330; in pandemic response, xvii–xviii, 335–337, 398n14–16. See also casualty assessments; emergency resource management; medical facilities; population survival; stockpiling programs, essential supplies; vital systems security

Health Services and Special Weapons Defense (Health Resources Office manual), 221, 295–296, 392n12

health system, 4, 41, 233, 270, 291; in civilian mobilization planning, 220–221; Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 263, 324. See also emergency resource management; health resources; medical facilities; population survival; stockpiling programs, essential supplies

Henderson, Leon, 101, 106, 110, 123, 359n70, 81; balance sheet planning and, 108; on WPB, 112

Herring, E. Pendleton, 125

Hill, David L., 196–197, 374n38

Hillman, Sydney, 112

Hiroshima bombing, 79, 188; damage assessment, 82, 163, 164, 205; health services response breakdown following, 221

History of the Theory of Sovereignty since Rousseau, The (Merriam), 21

Hitch, Charles, 120, 121, 362n157, 370n13

Hitchcock, Dal, 381n159

Hobbs, Edward Henry, 134

Hogan, Michael, 130, 134, 363n199

Holfiﬁeld, Chester, 280
Hoover, Herbert, 89, 344n53, 350n51, 360n101
Hoover Commission, 297–298, 393n19
Hopley, Russell, 218
Hopley report, 218–220, 225, 226, 378n109
horizontal vs. vertical systems of materials control, 120–123. See also vertical analysis
Horton, H. Burke, 178, 256, 311–314, 370n122, 371n132; Coker and, 307, 325–326, 331; on computerized damage assessment, 291–293, 301, 306, 307–309, 331; feasibility testing and, 175; on Gaither Committee, 317, 396n108; Interindustry Research Program and, 175, 180, 308–309; on manpower resource and population survival, 292–293, 311, 314; on NDAC attack simulations, 312, 313, 314, 331; on NDAC resource inventory, 309, 311; on Project SCOOP, 175–176; on radioactive fallout effects, 301, 312, 313. See also National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center)
Hosken, William, 229
hospitals. See medical facilities
household supplies, 305
House Subcommittee on Government Operations (Holifield Committee), 209–210, 280, 282–283, 317, 320, 396n105
housing and shelter: evacuation plans, 12–13, 190, 297, 316–317; Gaither Committee, 317, 396n108; Interindustry Research Program and, 175, 180, 308–309; on manpower resource and population survival, 292–293, 311, 314; on NDAC attack simulations, 312, 313, 314, 331; on NDAC resource inventory, 309, 311; on Project SCOOP, 175–176; on radioactive fallout effects, 301, 312, 313. See also National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center)
Hughes, Richard D., 70–71, 74–75, 79
Huglin, Harold, 271, 279, 286, 307, 371n144, 396n108
human resources. See manpower, as resource category; population survival
Hurricane Betsy (1965), 333
Hurricane Katrina (2005), xiv
Hurricane Sandy (2012), 333
hydration, feeding, and sheltering systems. See emergency resource management; food supply; housing and shelter; water systems
IBM, 118, 154, 156
ICAF (Industrial College of the Armed Forces), 1–3, 341n1
Ickes, Harold, 47–48
IEB (Industry Evaluation Board, Department of Commerce), 214, 215, 310, 377n98–99
Impact of War, The: Our Democracy under Arms (Herring), 125
income, 56, 351n71
industrial analysis, 364n3; target selection and, 40, 69, 140–141, 152–159, 166–168, 369n84; urban area analysis linked with, 142, 159, 161, 369n84, 380n150. See also air intelligence; vulnerability assessment
Industrial Classification Code, 179
Industrial College of the Armed Forces (ICAF), 1–3, 341n1
industrial dispersal, 184–185, 187, 195–210, 363n182; Bull report on, 252; climate-risk relocation and, 339; economic incentives, 195, 202, 209, 367n74; facility ratings and, 209, 213–215, 377n95; NSRB on, 185, 204–210, 212–223, 227–229; political challenges and criticism, 23, 195, 209–213, 339; Project East River Review Committee on, 302; projected sites for new construction, 205–206, 213; radioactive fallout and, 301–302; USSBS on, 81, 190. See also damage assessment, industrial vulnerability; dispersal; industrial vulnerability assessment; nuclear preparedness; passive defense measures
industrialization, xvii, 89–90. See also urbanization
Industrial Mobilization Plan, 363n192
industrial production: of airplanes, 64, 103, 105, 113, 116, 173–174; business cycle relationship, 50–51; of emergency essential supplies, 306, 322–323, 335–336; Gaither Committee on, 318; labor organizing, 343n36; pandemic response, xviii–xix; transportation systems’ importance, 45–46, 61, 149, 150; WWI effects on, 20, 41, 43. See also facility ratings; military-industrial production; New Deal planning; Post-Attack Industrial Rehabilitation (PAIR); science of flows; target selection
industrial vulnerability assessment, 41, 45, 61, 146–148; aiming point analysis, 205; blast damage assessment, 172, 229; bottlenecks and shortages and, 103, 113, 146–147, 212, 230, 366n29; Bull report on, 252–253; civilian mobilization planning and, 235–236; electricity and, 67–68; facility-level security measures and, 195, 214, 229, 377n96; inventory of resource data, 176–177, 191, 309–310; National Security Act on, 332. See also damage assessment, industrial vulnerability; industrial dispersal; target selection; vulnerability assessment
Industry Evaluation Board (Department of Commerce, IEB), 214, 215, 310, 377nn98–99
infrastructure, 12–13. See also critical infrastructure; housing and shelter; power and electricity systems; public works projects; transportation systems; urban vulnerability assessment; vital systems security; water systems infrastructure, term use, 343n32
input-output study, 76, 79, 117–118, 351n70. See also emergency resource management; knowledge infrastructure; resource management, material flows analysis; science of flows
Insull, Samuel, 43
insurance, 346nn78, 81
intelligence agencies, 72
Interagency Committee on Essential Survival Items (ODM), 305–306, 314, 322, 394n44
interdependencies, 142, 157–158, 323; ACTS study of, 63–64; dispersal and, 202; labor organizing and, 343n36; in military-industrial production, 148–152, 229–230; regional planning and, 42, 44–45, 49, 52. See also vital systems security
International Climate Emergency Forum, 339
internment camps, 144
inventory of resource data: BSDA work on, 324; CDUA on inventorying urban features, 169; industrial vulnerability and, 176–177, 191, 309–310; Interindustry Research Program and, 175–176, 308–309; inventory of national assets, 14–15, 31, 53–56, 175, 219, 292; manpower, 292–293, 311; NDAC work on, 292, 308–311, 316; NSRB work on, 126–127, 223, 295; survival items, 219–220, 294, 322–324, 326, 328; system vulnerability analysis and, 14, 31, 53–54, 168–169, 173, 176–177; WPB work on, 201. See also balance sheet planning; emergency resource management; facility ratings; resource management, material flows analysis; science of flows; stockpiling programs, essential supplies
Is Your Plant a Target? (NSRB pamphlet), 213
Jackson, Donald L., 211, 212
Jamieson, Dale, 340
Japan: area analysis and, 160–161, 163; industrial intelligence on, 153–154; industrial resilience to bombings in, 188–189; nuclear testing exposure to Japanese fishing vessel, 393n20; US bombing of, 79, 187, 193
Japanese-Americans, internment of, 144
Jasanoff, Sheila, 27, 346n80, 347nn85, 86, 348n99
jobs and employment: business cycles and, 51; unemployment rates, 102; WWII mobilization planning and, 100
Johnson, Louis A., 219
Joint Chiefs of Staff, 124, 128, 271, 367n57; Continental Defense Planning Group, 274; establish JTG, 153; establish Strategic Vulnerability Branch, 154, 367n55
Joint Committee on Defense Production, 329, 394n44
Joint Target Group (JTG), 325, 367nn48, 56, 368n58; area analysis by, 160–161, 369nn84, 85; industrial analysis by, 153–154, 160–161
Jones, Byrd L., 352n82
Jordan, Nehemiah, 225–226, 364n207, 379n136, 380n142
Kahn, Herman, 35, 294, 316, 317, 396n108
Karl, Barry, 92–94, 358n51
Katz, Barry, 71, 76
Katznelson, Ira, 356n11
Kaysen, Carl, 75, 139–142, 227, 354n144, 375n50, 397n141
Kefauver, Estes, 274–275
Kefauver Subcommittee, 280
Kendall, Charles, 129, 273
Kennedy, John F., 4, 225
Kennedy administration, 332–333, 362n157, 370n13
Keynesian economics, 351n71, 352nn72, 74, 82
Keyserling, Leon, 131
Kiefer, Norvin C., 221, 294–295
Kindleberger, Charles, 74, 77
Klein, Lawrence, 197
INDEX 431

security concept and, 331; raw data, analysis of, 155–156, 157; statistical analysis, 11, 101, 35ln66; in urban analysis, 168–173; WPB data collection, 116–120. See also air intelligence; airpower strategists; balance sheet planning; computer simulation; damage assessment; emergency resource management; expertise; facility ratings; maps; models and simulations; national economy; overlay technique; punched cards system; resource evaluation; resource management, material flows analysis; tabulating machines; United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSSBS)

Knowles, Morris, 44, 333
Knowles, Scott, 5
Koistinen, Paul A. C., 102, 103, 111, 115, 120, 358n59, 359n76; on mobilization planning, 360n97; on Planning Committee termination, 123; on PRP, 361n150; on stockpiling, 359n83

Korean War: bottlenecks and shortages during, 131, 201, 236; feasibility testing and, 330; military-industrial production during, 131, 208–209, 236; mobilization planning and, xviii, 130, 131–132, 175, 208, 234, 364n207, 386n53; NSRB and, 364n207; ODM and, 3, 257; offices overseeing emergency responsibilities regarding, 235, 236; outbreak of, 207–208, 212, 225

Krock, Arthur, 280
Krug, J. A., 190, 372n12
Kupperman, Robert, 8–9, 14
Kuznets, Simon, 56, 60, 101, 329, 351n71, 352n81; on WPB, 112

labor. See manpower
labor organizing, 343n36, 345n58
Lacey, Jim, 101
LaGuardia, Fiorello, 373n26
Lancaster, Presley, Jr., 382
Lapp, Ralph E., 163–164, 182–184, 189, 211–212, 226–227, 376n66
Larsen, Paul, 219, 225, 379n35
Lasswell, Harold, 125, 372n8
Lawrence, William, 307, 324

legal mechanisms for emergency government, 2, 31, 87, 334, 346n74; Committee on Administrative Management on, 357n47; legislative acts during Great Depression, 92; local authority, 88; standby legislation, 129; for vital systems security, 332

LeMay, Curtis, 79, 160, 196
Lend-Lease Act (1941), 23, 104, 108
Leontief, Wassily, 72, 79, 351n70
Lerch, Archer L., 366n26
Leuchtenberg, William, 92, 357n34

liberal constitutional government. See constitutional democracy, emergency powers and liberalism, 88–89
libertarianism, 380n153
Light, Jennifer, 184–185
Lincoln, Abraham, 17
Lincoln, George, 369n112
Linkert, Rensis, 374n45
Livermore, Shaw, 134, 228–229, 242, 382n183; on damage assessment, 394n51; emergency action steps project and, 386n54; on manpower resource, 302–303; on MPAC, 254, 256, 384n28, 389n91; on NPA study, 389n91; on NSC Planning Board, 383n185; on PAIR Central Task Force, 239, 381n75; on WPB, 112

local government: critique of centralized authority, 208; emergency action documents on, 285; in Germany, 89; preparedness planning, 184, 193, 234; Progressive reformers on, 88; vulnerability assessment by, 184. See also civilian mobilization planning; federal-state relations, emergency relief planning; governors; nonmilitary defense; responsibility and authority issues

local planning: aiming point analysis in, 170–171, 184; for civilian mobilization, 220–224; coordination issues for emergency relief, 270–271, 285, 388n77; dispersal and, 211, 215, 376n81; FCDA and, 241, 273–274, 300, 308, 320–321, 382n180; Office of Civil Defense focus, 217. See also regional planning
Lowe, James T., 197, 368n60, 63, 369n94; on data for target selection, 153, 155–156, 157, 166; Hansell recruits, 69, 367n49; at SVB, 154–157, 166–167. See also target selection
Luhmann, Niklas, 347n93

macroeconomics, 57, 350n44. See also New Deal Economics
Manhattan Project, 195, 196, 313, 369n90, 376n66

manpower, as resource category: air war requirements of, 70; balance sheet planning and, 128; coordination and
manpower, as resource category (continued) authority issues, 303; feasibility testing and, 176; Gaither Committee on, 318, 319; inventorying, 126–127, 128, 220; medical personnel, 299; military-industrial production and, 2, 202, 255; mobilization planning and, 126, 176, 186, 269; MPAC on, 302–303; national economy reliance on, 2, 54; NDAC assessment, 292–293; NDAC SURVIVAL model analysis, 326; postattack rehabilitation and, 253, 261–262, 284, 286, 288, 292–293, 303, 314–315, 318–319; radioactive fallout and, 311, 314–315; resource evaluation and, 192; shortages, 291, 315; vertical analysis, 311. See also casualty assessments; population survival


Marschak, Jacob, 197, 374nn35, 45

Marshall, George, 369n101

Marshall, T. H., 342n22

martial law, 32, 273–275, 389n91; definition, 278, 390n107; Fairman and, 281–282, 347n90, 391n125, 127; limited martial law, 277, 390n100, 111; Operation Alert (1955) and, 276–283, 340, 390n102, 107, 111, 391n27; Plan D-Minus and, 285; response to Eisenhower’s declaration, 251, 276, 279–283, 391n120, 125, 127; Rossiter on, 388n85; Schmitt on, 281, 391n120. See also military-civilian authority issues; responsibility and authority issues

Masco, Joseph, 185

Mason, Edward S., 60, 101

Massachusetts Civil Defense Agency, 280

Master Inspection Responsibility List, 144, 145–146

material flows. See emergency resource management; resource management, material flows analysis; science of flows

matériel, WWII mobilization planning and, 62, 104, 109–110. See also emergency resource management; military-industrial production; mobilization planning; resource management, material flows analysis


McCormick, John, 345n61

McCoy, H. B., 323, 329

McCrea, Roswell C., 46

McDermott, Edward, 3–4, 32, 342n5

McDonough, Leo, 210–211

McKinsey and Company, 337

McNamara, Robert, 370n113

McReynolds, William, 24, 85, 359n69

medical facilities: dispersal and, 184, 190; emergency action steps and, 265; packaged disaster hospitals, 297, 299, 325, 330; in pandemic response, 335, 398n15; postattack survival requirements for, 222, 232, 295, 325, 328. See also health resources; postattack survival requirements

medical supplies, stockpiling of. See postattack survival requirements; stockpiling programs, essential supplies

Merriam, Charles, 187; on Committee on Administrative Management, 93; on governmental adjustment, 18, 21, 88–91, 125; Lasswell and, 372n8; on NRPB, 47, 90–91, 356n27; regional planning by, 43; scholarship on, 356nn15, 18, 23; on “strategic points in a working system,” 123, 188. See also Progressive reformers

metallic sodium, 148–149, 150

metals, resources, 117; aluminum industry, 103, 105, 116, 121, 152; CMP on, 121; copper industry, 103, 121; steel industry, 54, 77, 103, 121, 199, 229. See also military-industrial production; resource management, material flows analysis

Metcalf, Evan, 50, 51

metropolitan growth. See urban vulnerability assessment

military, capacity to retaliate, 200, 375n51. See also postattack industrial rehabilitation

military-civilian authority issues: emergency relief, 270, 273–275, 393n19; nonmilitary defense, 193, 203–204, 218, 273–275, 373nn23, 26, 378n113; procurement and, 102, 106, 144–145, 358n59, 360n90, 1488; resource management, 105–107. See also martial law; responsibility and authority issues

military governance structure, 184–185

military-industrial complex (term), 59

military-industrial production: balance sheet planning in, 108–114, 187, 221, 321; facility-level
security measures, 195, 214, 229, 377n96; interdependencies in, 148–152, 229–230; Korean War, 131, 208–209, 236; New Deal economists on, 59–60, 99–100, 105–108, 358n65, 66; postattack industrial rehabilitation and, 228–235; preparedness assumptions about, 16, 104, 106–107, 109, 187; Soviet, 158; WWII, 20, 41, 43, 106. See also controlled materials allocation plans; dispersal; facility ratings; industrial production; industrial vulnerability assessment; mobilization planning; resource management, material flows analysis military-industrial production, WWII: bottlenecks and shortages, 100, 104–105, 106, 113, 114, 146–147, 201, 366n26; continuity of production, 143–144, 204, 365n12; facility ratings, 144–152, 192, 373n20; stockpiling issues, 103–104, 187; Victory Program, II, III. See also facility ratings; mobilization planning, WWII; War Production Board (WPB); World War II military procurement, 103–106; bills of materials in, 105–106; budget issues in, 102, 103–104, 174; feasibility testing in, II, II, III; military authority issues, 102, 106, 144–145, 148, 358n59, 360n90; NSRB direction of, 127; OPMG Internal Security Division, 190; priority ratings in, 104–105, 106; procurement agencies, 105, 116, 118, 120, 122–123; WPB direction of, II, II, 118, 123. See also controlled materials allocation plans; emergency resource management; military-industrial production; resource management, material flows analysis military spending, 109–111, 352n81; congressional appropriations for, 105, 106, 109–110, 130, 174, 370n14; peacetime preparedness and, 82, 134, 173–174 military strategy. See Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at; air intelligence; airpower strategists; war-planning assumptions, shifts in military unification. See National Security Act (1947) Miller, Alton C., 191, 192, 193, 374n30 Mitchell, Timothy, 351n64 Mitchell, Wesley, 47, 50, 90, 350n53 Mitchell, William “Billy,” 40, 62–63, 70, 140, 141, 143 Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) units, 297 Mobilization Plan C, 385n31 Mobilization Plan D-Minus (1957), 7, 32, 250, 283–290, 303, 315–316; emergency action documents in, 284–287; Emergency Action Task Force questions leading to, 283–284; manpower resource and population survival issues, 315; naming of, 385n31; planning leading to, 256–257, 263, 384n30, 385n31 mobilization planning, xv–xvi, 6, 11–12, 15, 123–136; anticipatory knowledge in, 102–103, 106–107, 135; attack simulations, 180–181; AWPD-1, 68–71; blueprint planning, 25, 129, 287; Bomb Damage Problem report on, 176–181; civil defense merges with, 302, 320–321, 332; climate mobilization, 339; computerization of, 34, 173–181, 369nn112–114; DPA and, xviii, 130–131, 132; Eberstadt report and, 124–127; Flemming on assumptions for, 253–254, 257, 306–307, 384n16, 385n31; ICAF volumes on, 1–3, 341n1; interval of time for, 124, 155, 256, 384n30; Korean War and, xviii, 130, 131–132, 175, 208, 234, 364n207, 386n53; legislation ignores, 329–330; manpower and, 126, 176, 186, 269; military-industrial conceptualization of, 7, 16, 320; New Deal planning influence on, 134; troop levels, 102, 108–109, II0. See also emergency resource management. See also balance sheet planning; civilian mobilization planning, NSRB’s role in; demobilization, of wartime agencies and offices; emergency resource management; industrial production; martial law; models and simulations; National Security Act (1947); National Security Resources Board (NSRB); Office for Emergency Management (OEM); Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM); passive defense measures; resource management; resource management, material flows analysis; test exercises; war-planning assumptions, shifts in mobilization planning, WWII, 98–111, 124–127, 329; all-outers in, 101–103, 106–111, 112; Army-Navy Munitions Board, 103, III, 121, 359n83, 362n177; British influence, 359n86; delegatory statutes in, 98–99, 103, 106, 123, 269; economic mobilization, 98–101, 352n78; executive authority, 98–111; expertise, 99, 101, 105–111; influence on nuclear preparedness, 198, 199–200, 321–322, 375n47; material
mobilization planning (continued)
flows analysis and, 100, 102–103, 111–123; military spending, 109–111; New Deal economists and, 59–60, 98–103, 105–108, 359n79; regulatory devices and, 84, 99, 101–103, 129; Rossiter on, 248. See also feasibility testing, WWII mobilization planning; military-industrial production, WWII; World War II Mobilization Program Advisory Committee (MPAC), 253–256, 307, 384n28, 385n33, 394n51; on emergency resource management, 302–303; members on, 254–255, 366n41; NPA study and, 275, 389n91; on test exercises and war games, 265–266 mobilization specialists, 132, 134–135, 230, 254, 275, 321; Air Force mobilization specialists, 173; Anshen, 84, 105, 116, 122, 135, 384n21, 389n91; digital computers and, 142, 173; Elliott., 252, 253, 383n9; Fox, 135, 384n21; Gordon, 120, 135, 384n21; Lincoln, 369n112; Skuce, 135, 384n21. See also expertise; George, Edwin B.; Livernois, Shaw; Truppner, William
models and simulations, xiii, 311–316; in area analysis, 142; *Bomb Damage Problem* proposals, 176–179; for emergency resource management, 322–328; event modeling in civil defense planning, 170–171; Gaither Committee and, 317–319; ODM and, 180, 250, 255–256, 265–268, 332; “possibilistic” and “probabilistic” knowledge, 343n31; for scientific rationalization of “unthinkable” outcomes, 34–35, 292, 329; for unprecedented catastrophic scenarios, 15, 25, 267, 332, 334, 344n43. See also attack simulations; computer simulation; knowledge infrastructure; National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center); National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center), modeling and simulation by; test exercises; vulnerability assessment, models and simulations for modernity, “first” and “second” phases (Beck), 26. See also urbanization modernization, reflexive, 26–27, 28 modernization risks (Beck), 9 Monnet, Jean, 108 monopolies, 88 Monte Carlo simulation, 313 Morse, Chandler, 75 Moss, Malcolm, 69 Mount Weather, Virginia, 268, 308, 386n44 Munitions Requirements of the Army Air Force for the Defeat of Our Potential Enemies (AWPD-1), 70 Muscle Shoals power plant, 44, 48 Nagasaki bombing, 79, 188, 373n28; damage assessment, 82, 163, 164, 205; health services response breakdown following, 221 Nathan, Robert, 56, 60, 101, 102–103, 329; balance sheets and, 108, 110–111, 113, 114; on income statistics, 351n71; Victory Program and, 339, 360n110; on WPB, 112, 120 national assets, inventory of, 14–15, 31, 53–56, 175, 219, 292. See also inventory of resource data; resource management National Bureau of Economic Research, 56 National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), 351n70 National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center), 324–328, 384n27; becomes NREC, 325, 342n21; creation of, 256, 292; influence on Gaither Committee, 316, 318; inventory of resource data by, 292, 308–311, 316; postattack survival requirements analysis, 324, 326–328; Systems Evaluation Division, 342n21; vertical analysis, 310–311. See also Coker, Joseph; damage assessment; Horton, H. Burke; Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM) National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center), modeling and simulation by, 292–293, 309, 311–314, 331; computational models, 312–314, 324, 326–328; Operation Alert (1957), 315–316; radioactive fallout modeling, challenges, 311–312, 314–315, 395n78–79; UNIVAC installed, 308. See also attack simulations; damage assessment, computerization of; models and simulations National Defense Advisory Committee (OEM), 84, 103–105, 359n72, 73, 360n90; creation of, 101; on stockpiling, 359n84. See also Office for Emergency Management (OEM) national economy, 2–3, 5, 53–59; capitalism and, 209–210, 213, 347n90; electricity and, 66–68; NRBP study of, 49, 57–59, 350n57; NYC importance in, 65; reorganization, as climate response, 339; WWII
mobilization planning, 98–101, 352n78. See also New Deal Economics; science of flows; vital systems, continuous operation of national income accounting, 56
National Military Establishment (later Department of Defense), 127, 363n180
National Plan for Emergency Preparedness (1964), 256
National Planning Association (NPA), 275, 389n91
National Planning Board (later National Resources Planning Board, NRPB), 47, 90–91, 356n27. See also National Resources Planning Board (NRPB)
National Preparedness Goal (FEMA, 2015), 4
National resource Committee, 351n70
National Resources Evaluation Center (NREC, formerly NDAC), 325, 342n21
National Resources Planning Board (NRPB), 47–60, 83, 96, 133–135; Clark's study for, 52–53; data collection by, 53–59; economic stimulus analysis by, 52, 53, 350n57; functions of, 54, 349n34, 35; Galbraith's study for, 57–59; incarnations of, 47, 90–91, 349nn31, 33, 34, 356n27; science of flows, 49–60; substantive economy study by, 57–59; termination of, 123, 134, 190, 372n12; WWII mobilization planning and, 100. See also New Deal Economics; regional planning
National Security Act (1947), 130, 218; NSRB creation and, 16, 204; NSRB functions outlined by, 16, 127–128, 189, 204, 332; unification study and, 125, 127, 362n179, 363n182, 375n61; US Air Force established through, 367n56. See also National Security Resources Board (NSRB)
National Security Council (NSC), 251–253, 287, 317, 390n111; Bull Committee and, 252–253; continental defense and, 244; creation of, 127; essential functions analysis and, 261, 385n43; facility-level security planning by, 214, 377n96; NSC 68 study, 130, 363n199; NSRB and government continuity planning, 237; Planning Board, 252, 254, 382n185, 396n104; resource evaluation oversight by, 377n96 National Security Factors in Industrial Location (NSRB pamphlet), 184, 204–208, 212
National Security Resources Board (NSRB), xv–xvi, 33–34, 83, 127–132, 134–135, 364n207; balance sheet analysis, 127, 128, 134, 217; Blue Book of, 184–185, 225–227, 295, 373n24, 379n136; Bull report on, 204; Central Task Force (PAIR project), 239–242, 381n75, 382nn78–180; City X study, 182–184; Coale's work by, 375n50; Congress and, 16, 127, 128, 135, 208, 209, 225–226, 238, 363n183; creation of, 127, 134, 363n183; distributed preparedness and, 131, 188, 225, 241; Division of Post-Attack Rehabilitation survey, 236–237, 381n65; Eberstadt report on, 126–127; emergency action steps project originating in, 263–264, 386n53, 387n55; essential functions analysis and, 188, 385n43; functions of, 16, 127–128, 184, 189, 204, 232, 238–239, 243, 332, 375n63; Health Resources Office, 294–296, 392n12; industrial dispersal work by, 185, 204–210, 212–213, 227–229; inventory of resource data and, 126–127, 223, 295; merges with ODM, 244, 249, 348n109, 382n180, 383nn5, 13; National Security Factors in Industrial Location, 184, 204–208, 212; as Office of National Mobilization, 257–258; Project SCOOP and, 175; Special Security Programs Office, 227, 228, 382n183, 383n13; staff transfer to ODM and FCDA, 380n143, 382n183; statutory mandate, 189, 204, 208, 217, 238–239, 249. See also civilian mobilization planning, NSRB's role in; nonmilitary defense, NSRB's role in; nuclear preparedness, NSRB's role in natural disasters, 5, 64, 347n95; ad hoc responses, 344n45; climate emergencies, 339, 340; hurricanes, xiv, 333
Navy, US, resistance to air force creation, 63
NBER (National Bureau of Economic Research), 351n70
NDAC. See National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center)
Nelson, Donald, 102, 108–109, 110, 123; facility ratings and, 145; PRP and, 361n150; on WPB, 112–114, 120
Neocleous, Mark, 27–28, 347n90
New Aspects of Politics (Merriam), 89
Newcomb, Robinson, 214–215, 377n95, 378n103
New Deal agencies, 44, 47–48
New Deal Economics, 6, 15, 31, 351n64; all-outers, 108; business cycles and, 50–51, 350n44; on controlled materials allocation plans, 115–123; data collection by, 53–59; feasibility testing and, 60, 111,
New Deal Economics (continued)
115, 361n134; flow charts by, 230; income statistics, 56, 351n71; Keynesian economics, 351n71, 352n72, 74, 82; national economy conceptualization and, 53, 54; system vulnerability analysis, 41; targeted government interventions, 56–59; taxation and, 350n57, 352n74; on WPB, 112–115; in WWII mobilization planning, 56–60, 98–103, 105–108, 359n79. See also national economy; National Resources Planning Board (NRPB); resource management, material flows analysis; Roosevelt administration; science of flows


New Deal Planning, 6–7, 47–49, 61, 349n8, 357n34; congressional debates, 48–49, 85, 87, 102, 104, 133–135; delegatory statutes in, 92, 357nn35, 37; governmental adjustment, 88–91; influence on Plan D-Minus, 289; material flows analysis, 42–43, 48, 52–53, 55, 57–58, 100, 117–118, 231; public works projects, 18, 47–49, 61, 350n42, 58; targeted government interventions, 56–59; welfare state, 133. See also Progressive reformers; Roosevelt administration

New Democracy and the New Despotism, The (Merriam), 21

Newsom, Gavin, 398n15

New York City, system vulnerability analysis of, 63, 65–67

New York Plan, 45

New York region, 44–47

New York Times, 187, 280

N/II, xii, 27, 333

Nitze, Paul, 80–81, 244, 252, 396n104

Nixon administration, 333

nonmilitary defense, xv–xx, 2, 32; advocates for, 374n40; Bomb Damage Problem on, 179; Bull report on, 217–218; CDUA and, 168–173, 221; “civilian” vs. civil defense, terms, 374n30; federal-state relations and, 217–218, 225, 273–275, 374n30, 379n136; Gaither Committee on, 312, 396n108; maps in, 168–169, 170, 171–173; military vs. civilian oversight of, 193, 203–204, 218, 273–275, 373n23, 26, 378n113; mobilization planning and civil defense merge, 302, 320–321, 332; NSC and, 252; ODM-FCDA merger, 320; ODM oversight, 253, 256–257, 302, 307, 320, 383n13; OEP oversight, 9, 333; OPMG, Beers’s report, 193–194, 374n30; OPMG mobilization studies, 190–192, 193, 203; political debates on, 208, 273–275, 389n87; population survival as resource management, 315, 320, 329, 331–332; Project East River on, 302, 374n40; radioactive fallout and, 301; RAND Corporation cost-benefit research, 396n108; in unification study, 375n61; for unprecedented events, 331–332; USSBS on, 82, 189, 193. See also Atomic Energy Commission (AEC); civilian mobilization planning; dispersal; Federal Civil Defense Act (1950); Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA); Mobilization Plan D-Minus; Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM); passive defense measures; Project East River; stockpiling programs, essential supplies

nonmilitary defense, NSRB’s role in, 34, 127, 168, 380n43, 383n13; Civil Defense Vulnerability Manual, 168; government acceptance of, 244; government continuity, 249; government planning and policy in, 189; health resources and, 294; PAIR project, 241–242, 249, 375n50; political pressures in, 208; programs in scope of, 188; Progressive reformers’ influence on, 188; Project East River, 244, 382n184; as statutory mandate, 189, 204, 208, 217, 238–239, 249; test exercises, 255, 387n65. See also civilian mobilization planning, NSRB’s role in; National Security Resources Board (NSRB)

North Korea, 130, 225

Norton, Charles, 43, 45

Norton, C. McKim, 382n184

Notestein, Frank, 374n45

Novick, David, 84, 117, 135, 363n185, 370n13; CMP and, 121, 122, 362n157; on MPAC, 366n41, 384n21; priority ratings and, 105, 116

NPA (National Planning Association), 275, 389n91

NSC 68 study, 130, 363n199

NSC 159 (Bull Board report), 204, 217–218, 252–253, 375n60, 61, 383n12

nuclear preparedness, xv–xx, 3, 11, 34, 99, 182–244, 334; Beers’s OPMG report, 193–194, 271, 374n30, 391n125; City X study and, 182–184; climate change and, 338; dispersal proposals and, 184–185,
INDEX 437

194–203; essential services analysis and, 149–150; feasibility testing in, 115, 322; federal-state relations and, 269, 295–296, 300; local governments’ role in, 115, 322, 193, 234; militarization of society and, 185, 189–194; military powers of retaliation questions, 372n14; mobilization specialists for, 135; political issues in, 187–188, 208; RAND corporation and, 35; resource management and, 180–181, 188; skepticism about, 329–330; WWII mobilization planning influence on, 198, 199–200, 321–322, 375n47.

See also aiming point analysis; area analysis; Atomic Energy Commission (AEC); damage assessment; dispersal; industrial dispersal; passive defense measures nuclear preparedness, NSRB’s role in, 204–210; aiming point analysis in, 184, 205, 206, 221, 222, 235–236; damage assessment, 188, 205–207, 209, 221, 222–223, 241, 243, 382n78; dispersal proposals and, 127, 184–185, 188, 189, 204, 209, 211–212, 375n63; government dispersal and continuity, 205–207; National Security Factors in Industrial Location, 184, 204–208, 212; pamphlets by, 184, 204–208, 212, 213. See also civilian mobilization planning, NSRB’s role in; National Security Resources Board (NSRB); nonmilitary defense, NSRB’s role in; Post-Attack Industrial Rehabilitation (PAIR, NSRB program)
nuclear weapons, 162–168, 369n90, 393n20; advances in, 300, 301, 302, 320; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists on, 182, 195–196, 197, 211, 226–227; damage assessment of US attacks in Japan, 160–161, 163, 164, 205; Effects of Atomic Weapons, 379n124; stockpiling, 196, 274, 319, 374n37; testing, 139, 184, 207, 247, 298, 393n20. See also damage assessment; target selection

Oakes, Guy, 268, 389n95

Office for Emergency Management (OEM), 23, 84–86; creation of, 24, 84–86, 100–101, 356n10; Emmerich on, 84, 359n69; feasibility testing and, 112–115; functions of, 84, 85, 248; National Defense Advisory Committee, 84, 101, 103–105, 359n84, 359m72, 73, 360n90; reorganization authority and, 97, 100–101, 106, 107, 112; Rossiter on, 24, 248, 355n2; termination of, 86, 248; visions for permanence of, 86, 248

Office for the Coordinator of Information (later Office of Strategic Services, OSS), 72

Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization (OCDM), 320–321, 322, 330, 332

Office of Civil Defense (1960s), 332

Office of Civil Defense Planning (1940s), 218, 378n109

Office of Civilian Defense (WWII), 193, 203, 217, 373n26

Office of Civilian Mobilization (NSRB), 219–221, 225, 237, 379n128; Health Resources Division, 220–221, 379n122


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Office of Defense Mobilization (continued) of, 382n183. See also administrative readiness, ODM and; Flemming, Arthur; Gaither Committee; Horton, H. Burke; Mobilization Plan D-Minus (1957); Mobilization Program Advisory Committee; National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC, later National Resource Evaluation Center); Office of War Resources (wartime name of ODM)

Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM), damage assessment. See National Damage Assessment Center (NDAC)

Office of Emergency Planning (later Office of Emergency Preparedness), xvi, 3, 32, 256, 332–333, 341n8

Office of Emergency Preparedness (OEP), xv, 3, 9, 342n21; as Office of Emergency Planning, xvi, 341n8

Office of Industrial Mobilization (BDSA), 310

Office of Inquiry into the Social Aspects of Atomic Energy, 374n35

Office of National Mobilization (wartime name of NSRB), 257–258

Office of Price Administration, 84

Office of Statistical Planning, 367n50

Office of Strategic Services (OSS, formerly Office for the Coordinator of Information), 60, 72–82, 354n128; EOU, 74–82


Office of the Secretary of Defense, 296


Ogburn, William, 374n45

oil and fuel systems, 68, 77, 81; EOU on, 355n149, 157; as essential services supporting military-industrial production, 149–150, 151; Gaither Committee on, 318–319; gasoline production, 159; Soviet Union, 158. See also power and electricity systems

Oliver, Wallace B., 326

Olmstead, Frederick Law, Jr., 44

Olson, Mancur, 354n123

Operation Alert exercise (1955), 251, 265, 275–283, 382, 387n61; health resources management and, 298–299; limited martial law and, 277, 390n100, 111; martial law declaration, 276–283, 340, 390n102, 107, 111, 391n27; ODM integration with, 268; participants in, 276, 389n95

Operation Alert exercise (1956), 304–305

Operation Alert exercise (1957), 312, 315–316, 322

Operation Alert exercises, conclusions from, 330

Operation Readiness, 266–268

OPMG. See Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG)

OSS (Office of Strategic Services), 60, 72–82, 354n128

Our Missing Shield (Yoshpe), 374n30

overlay technique: in aiming point analysis, 142, 171; in area analysis, 142, 159–160, 161, 162; computers replace, 15, 178, 181; damage assessment, 142, 159–160, 161, 162, 170–172; German-developed, 369n87, 372n146; target selection, 142, 162, 166, 170, 177; vulnerability assessment, 15, 45, 142. See also damage assessment; maps; target selection

Pacific war, 79, 82, 154, 179; target selection and, 160–162. See also World War II

packaged disaster hospitals, 297, 299, 325, 330. See also medical facilities

PAIR. See Post-Attack Industrial Rehabilitation (PAIR)

Paley Commission, 381n75

pandemic response, xvii–xix, 335–337, 398nn14–16

passive defense measures, 81, 82, 143, 184, 293; active defensive measures, 193, 244, 251, 374n39, 389n87; Gaither study, 316–320, 322, 396n107, 397n138; political challenges of, 187–188. See also dispersal; emergency preparedness; mobilization planning; nonmilitary defense

Patterns of Resource Use (NRPB study), 54

Patterson, James T., 210

Patterson, Robert, 190, 372n12

Paul, Willard S., 257, 258, 384n30; administrative readiness and, 271, 278, 279, 285, 384n30, 389n91; Collett memo to, 269, 271
INDEX 439

peacetime preparedness, 7; agencies' wartime incarnations, 258, 260, 265, 286–287; air intelligence and, 154, 155; dispersal and, 195; Hopley report on, 218; military expenses, 82, 134, 173–174; OPMG recommendations for oversight of, 191. See also administrative readiness, ODM and; National Security Act (1947); National Security Resources Board (NSRB); New Deal Planning; nuclear preparedness

Pearl Harbor attack, 111

Pentagon, 206

Peterson, Val, 276, 277–278, 279–280, 299, 300

petroleum. See oil and fuel systems

Pettee, James C., 154, 307, 367n49

Pierpaoli, Paul, 130, 131

Plan D-Minus. See Mobilization Plan D-Minus (1957)

Plan for New York and Its Environs, 45, 66

Planning Committee (WPB). See War Production Board, Planning Committee

Planning for Control and Direction of Total Wartime Resources by Non-Military Authority (MPAC Bedsheet report), 254–255, 384n25

planning procedures, mobilization and preparedness, 87, 220, 241, 250, 264, 266, 288; impatience with, 225, 379nn134, 136. See also emergency relief planning; mobilization planning; nuclear preparedness; resource management

Plan of New York and Its Environs (1929), 42

Platt, Harold L., 20, 42, 43, 349m18, 380n148

Platt, William J., 229, 382n183

Polanyi, Karl, 342n22, 351n64

Polenberg, Richard, 357n33, 358n52

political rationality, 6, 332–340, 343n34

political technology of emergency government, 8, 18, 21–24, 86–87; elements of (tables), 23, 99

population dispersal. See dispersal; evacuation plans

population security, 11–13, 18–19, 331, 335, 337; civilian protection and relief, 188, 208, 217–219, 225, 304; forms of security, compared, 13. See also biopolitics; emergency relief planning; postattack survival requirements; vital systems; vulnerability assessment

population survival, 200, 212, 291–328, 375n51; balance sheet planning in, 180, 294, 301, 304, 306–307, 321–328, 397n138; damage assessment and, 291–293; manpower, as resource, 302–303; ODM mobilization planning for essential survival items, 301–306; as resource management problem, 314–321, 329, 331–332; supply-requirement analysis, 306–307, 315–319, 322–328, 397n138. See also casualty assessments; emergency resource management; postattack survival requirements; stockpiling programs, essential supplies

positive government, 98, 100, 133, 344n52


Post-Attack Industrial Rehabilitation (PAIR, NSRB program), 228–242, 255, 290, 380n145, 382n185; Central Task Force, 239–242, 381n175, 382n178, 180, 183; Conference, 235–237, 381n158–160; Dickinson leads, 235, 239, 381n175; government continuity and, 237–239, 240, 243, 249, 254, 381n165, 170; SRI report, 229–235, 375n50, 380n148–149, 381n165; termination of, 243. See also National Security Resources Board (NSRB)

postattack survival requirements, 188, 301–306; balance sheet planning in, 180, 294, 301, 304, 306–307, 321–328, 397n138; BDSA analysis of, 322–325, 397n131; damage assessment influence on, 306, 315–319, 324; electricity needs, 288; feasibility testing of, 315; Inter-agency Committee on Essential Survival Items, 305–306, 314, 322, 394n44; medical facilities and, 222, 232, 295, 325, 328; NDAC analysis of, 324, 326–328; ODM and, 299, 301–306, 320, 394n44; ODM-FCDA merger and, 294; supply-requirements balance sheet, 322–328, 397n138. See also health resources; population survival; stockpiling programs, essential supplies

Potts, Ramsay, 213, 227, 228, 238, 377n83, 380n145

power and electricity systems: emergency action steps for, 264–265, 270, 288; Germany, 355n147; regional planning and, 43, 44, 47, 48; Soviet Union, 158; test exercises in civilian mobilization planning, 223; WWI power shortages, 67, 349n13, 18, 353n107. See also oil and fuel systems; system vulnerability analysis; water systems
power and electricity systems, vulnerability assessment of: ACTS studies on, 66–68; by Department of the Interior, 324; Interagency Committee on Essential Survival Items on, 305; by NRPB, 100; by OPMG, 145, 149–150, 192; by Resources Protection Board, 150–151, 151–152; SRI report on, 230–232, 233. See also vulnerability assessment

precision bombing, 63–64, 160, 163, 167, 368n80. See also target selection

"Preparation by Federal Agencies of Civil Defense Emergency Plans" (Truman executive order), 238–239 preparedness exercises. See models and simulations; test exercises

preparedness ideology, 2, 124, 185–187, 362n167. See also distributed preparedness; mobilization planning; nonmilitary defense; nuclear preparedness; passive defense measures

presidential powers. See executive authority President’s Committee on Unemployment and Business Cycles, 51 primary loss, 229–230, 380n150

priority ratings for industrial production, xviii, 104–105, 106, 111, 116, 131, 360n89. See also facility ratings

private firms, postattack industrial rehabilitation and, 234

problematization, 348nn102, 107, 371n145

Problem of Reducing Vulnerability to Atomic Bombs, The (Coale), 199, 375n50, 397n141

production programming systems. See controlled materials allocation plans; military-industrial production; resource management, material flows analysis

Production Requirements Plan (PRP), 116–120, 360n89, 361n140, 145, 150, 362n156; CMP builds on, 122. See also controlled materials allocation plans; War Production Board, Planning Committee

Progressive reformers, 17–25, 29, 44, 122–123, 188; on executive and reorganization authority, 18–19, 87, 88, 91–98, 132–133, 340. See also Merriam, Charles; New Deal Planning; Roosevelt administration

Project Charles, 227, 251

Project Congreve, 157

Project East River, 34, 227, 251, 274, 374n40, 380n142; NSRB staff on, 244, 382n184; radioactive fallout assessment by, 301–302. See also nonmilitary defense


“Proposed Statement of Industrial Dispersion Policy” (NSRB), 211 Provost Marshal General, 204 PRP. See Production Requirements Plan (PRP)

Public Administration Clearing House, 88, 125 public health, 331, 335–337. See also health system

Public Health Service, 263, 325 Public Works Administration (PWA), 47–49; science of flows study, 52, 57–58. See also New Deal Planning Public Works Planning (NRPB study), 54 public works projects, 18, 47–49, 61, 350n42, 58 punched cards system, 146, 329, 367n50; area analysis and, 161, 166; Bombing Encyclopedia and, 156, 157; IBM, 118, 154, 156; Project SCOOP and, 174–175. See also knowledge infrastructure; tabulating machines; target selection

Quesada, Elwood, 367n57

Rabi, Isidor, 374n45

Rabinow, Paul, 31, 348n103

Rabinowitch, Eugene, 196–197, 226, 374n38

Radford, Arthur, 279 radioactive fallout, 165, 172, 207, 369n109; AEC on, 298, 301; Coker on, 395n92; damage assessment, 301–302, 312–314, 395nn78–79; fallout shelters, 317; Horton on, 301, 312, 313; NDAC modeling of, 311–312, 314–315, 395nn78–79; nuclear testing and, 298, 393n20; stockpiling locations and, 300, 330. See also damage assessment; fire damage assessment; nuclear weapons

railroads, 62, 64, 66, 149, 150; regional planning and, 43, 44; Soviet Union, 158, 354n128. See also transportation systems

Rains, Albert, 210, 211, 212

Ramsay, Colonel F. A., 308, 371n127

RAND Corporation, 121, 157, 366n41, 369n12, 384n21, 396n108; PAIR program
and, 228–229, 239, 375n50; systems analysis development at, 15, 35, 370n113
Rankin, Lee, 272–273
rapid amortization: for industrial dispersal, 195, 202, 209, 375n74; for industrial production of essential goods, 392n10; for military-industrial production, 99, 103, 129, 131, 210, 359n81. See also taxation
rationing, 233, 270, 289
Reagan, Patrick, 89, 349n8, 15, 23, 25
Reagan administration, 9
Redfield, Robert, 374n35
reflexive biopolitics, 8, 10–16, 41–42, 335
reflexive modernization, 26–27, 28
regional planning, 14, 61, 349n32; Chicago, 42–44; interdependencies and, 42, 44–45, 49, 52; New Deal planning, 47–49, 52; New York, 44–47; system vulnerability analysis, 41, 42–49. See also federal-state relations; local government; National Resources Planning Board (NRPB); science of flows
Regional Survey of New York and Its Environments, 45
regulatory devices, 31–32, 87, 209, 236, 359n76; mobilization planning, 84, 99, 101–103, 129, 360n97. See also administrative devices
relocation sites, 237–238, 261, 267–268, 386n44. See also dispersal; government continuity
Reorganization Act (1939), 23, 24, 87, 96–98, 103, 344n55, 358nn56, 63; expiration of, 359n69; OEM creation and, 101; passing of, 97
reorganization authority: Carter administration, 333; Eisenhower administration, 383n5; Karl on, 358n51; Kennedy administration, 332, 333; after 9/11, 333; nonmilitary defense and, 320, 332; NSRB and, 129; NSRB-ODM merger, 249, 383n5; ODM creation, 332; ODM creation and changes, 253, 260, 304; OEM and, 97, 100–101, 106, 107, 112; Rossiter on, 357n33; Truman administration, 130. See also constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; delegatory statutes
reorganization authority, Roosevelt administration, 103, 357n37, 358nn51, 56; Committee on Administrative Management, 23–24, 93–97, 344n55, 357n47, 358n52; conservative criticism, 96, 99–100, 123, 135, 357nn33, 35, 358n60; intelligence agencies, 72; within OEM, 106, 107, 112; OEM creation and, 85–86, 97, 100–101; Progressive reformers and, 18–19, 87, 88, 91–98, 132–133, 340. See also constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; executive authority; Reorganization Act (1939); Roosevelt administration
Reorganization Plan (1953), 260
Requirements Committee (WPB), 116–117, 120, 121
Research and Development Board (military), 227
resilience, 11, 325; cushion and, 76–77, 80, 82–83, 155, 157–158, 192, 199; depth and, 76–77, 80, 82–83, 155, 157–158, 199; genealogy of, 343n28, 380n153; in Germany, 81–82, 163, 188–189; resource evaluation used for designing, 192; SRI report on, 229, 232; USBS on, 189–190, 232. See also substitution
resource evaluation: concentration problem, 146–148, 191, 195, 230; data sources used for Bombing Encyclopedia, 156; dispersal and, 192, 195, 198, 214, 378n102; by IEB, 214; influence on emergency resource management, 243; influence on NDAC, 325; influence on preparedness, 187; influence on vulnerability assessment, 192, 195, 198, 205, 214, 328, 373n20; NSC and, 377n96; OPMG on, 189, 190, 191–192, 373n20, 377n96; resilience and, 192; by Resources Protection Board, 190, 191; urban analysis and, 169; by WPB, 142, 143–149, 152, 159. See also facility ratings
resource evaluation specialists, 146, 148–149, 152–153, 191, 230, 325, 365n17. See also Coker, Joseph
resource management, material flows analysis, 40, 87, 99, 126, 310; CMP and, 121–123; by EOU, 76–77; facility ratings in, 144–150; flow charts, 230; military-civilian authority issues, 105–107; by OSS, 60, 72, 73; by PWA and New Deal planners, 42–43, 48, 52–53, 55, 57–58, 100, 117–118, 231, 361n40; SRI report, 229–230; WWII mobilization planning and, 100, 102–103, 111–123. See also emergency resource management; feasibility testing; mobilization planning; science of flows; stocks and flows; vulnerability assessment
responsibility and authority issues in emergency government, 239–242, 285, 288–289, 388n77; Blue Book on, 295; chain of command, 234, 251, 269–275, 278, 283; decentralized authority in balance sheet planning, 131; DHS/FEMA, xiii–xiv; for health resources, 298–299, 393n19; Health Services manual on, 295; in military procurement, 102, 106, 144–145, 148, 358n59, 360n90; in pandemic response, 336; in stockpiling, 294, 295–297, 303–304. See also constitutional democracy, emergency powers and; executive authority; federal-state relations; military-civilian authority issues

Riefler, Winfield, 56, 59, 75, 197–198, 375n47

RISK (NDAC hazard analysis model), 313
risk assessment, 11, 12, 26–27, 346nn78, 81
risk management, 346n78
Risk Society (Beck), 341n2, 346n81, 347n87
Roback, Herbert, 299–300
Rock, Vincent, 257, 265, 389n91, 396n108
Roman model of commissarial dictatorship, 21–22
Roosevelt, Eleanor, 373n26
Roosevelt, Franklin Delano, 350n51; “limited national emergency” declaration, 359n68; on national asset inventory, 14, 54
Roosevelt administration, 69–70, 204, 361n40; business cycle study during, 50–52; Currie as special advisor, 57, 60, 352n73; OEM creation, 84–86, 355n2, 359n69; PWA creation, 47–49, 52, 57–58; Victory Program, 110, 111, 113, 339, 360n110. See also New Deal Economics; New Deal Planning; Progressive reformers; reorganization authority, Roosevelt administration
Rose, Nikolas, 6
Rosinger, Kurt E., 214
Rostower, Clinton, xvii, 132–133, 346n72, 379n134; constitutional democracy and, 17, 19, 22, 247–248, 251, 269, 340, 345n67; Constitutional Dictatorship, 20–22, 345nn63, 64, 391n20; martial law and, 281, 391n20; on political technology, 21, 24, 86; rational-technical characteristic of dictatorship, 21–22, 345n63, 64; scholarship on, 345n61, 64, 347n96; on Weimar constitution, 22, 345n67. See also dictatorship
Schultz, T. W., 374n35
science of flows, 49–60, 71–72, 99–100; business cycle study, 50–52; in CMP operations, 122–123; data collection in study of, 53–59; Galbraith on, 57–59; influence on SRI report, 230; regularization in, 51, 331–332, 350n50; target selection and, 72, 76, 77–78. See also emergency resource management; New Deal Economics; resource management, material flows analysis
Scott, Mel, 44, 45
Searls, Fred, Jr., 112, 113
Seattle, Washington, 376n81
secondary loss, 122, 230, 380n150
second-order observation (Luhmann), 347n93
security, forms of, compared (table), 13
Security, Work, and Relief Policies (NRPB), 133
“Selection of Industrial Bombing Targets, The” (EOU memo), 75–76
selective dispersal, 195–198, 200, 206, 208–215, 227, 376n81. See also dispersal
Senate Armed Services Committee, 274–275
September 11, 2001, xii, 27, 333
shelter. See housing and shelter
Shelton, William, 54–56
Sherman, William C., 39–41, 62, 64, 77
Sherry, Michael S., 362n167
Shils, Edward, 374n35
shock waves, 207
shortages. See bottlenecks and shortages
Simpson, John A., 196–197, 374n38
simulations. See attack simulations; models and simulations; test exercises; vulnerability assessment, models and simulations for sites of technical practice, 30, 31–32
Skuce, Walter, 135, 384n21
slack, economic concept, 58, 102
Smith, R. Elberton, 118
Social Science Research Council (SSRC), 88, 197–203, 374n45
Social Security Administration, 263
social welfare, 41, 133, 134
South Korea, 130, 225
sovereign dictatorship, 22
sovereign state security, 10–11, 12, 19–20, 343n30, 345n58; forms of security, compared, 13. See also vital systems security
Soviet Union: air intelligence on, 163, 166, 178, 368n60; Bombing Encyclopedia on, 156, 158; nuclear stockpile of, 274, 319, 374n37; nuclear testing by, 207, 247; railroads and, 158, 354n128; SVB on, 155, 166. See also Cold War
Sputnik launch, 319
SRI. See Stanford Research Institute (SRI)
SSRC (Social Science Research Council), 88, 197–203, 374n45
state of emergency, 27–28, 29, 131. See also emergency declarations
state of preparedness. See preparedness
Stead, William H., 228, 235–236, 381n75, 389n91
steel industry, 54, 77, 103, 121, 199, 229
Steinberg, Ted, 5
Steiner, George A., 117
stockpiling, 359n83; all-outers on, 102, 103; budget issues, 103, 297, 299, 304, 319, 325, 330, 359n84, 396n15; dispersal and, 191–192, 195, 202; location issues, 202, 229; military-industrial production and, 103–104, 187; NSRB and, 127, 128, 219, 220, 228; nuclear weapons, 196, 274, 319, 374n37; regulatory device of, 99, 102, 103; SRI report on postattack industrial rehabilitation, 229, 233; USSBS recommendations, 190; wartime oversight, 265, 270, 275
Stockpiling Act (1939), 23, 363n181
stockpiling programs, essential supplies, 82–83, 293–294, 296–305, 316–326, 393n16; balance sheet planning in, 294, 301, 304, 306; BDSA assessment of, 322–325, 397n131; congressional issues, 103, 297–300, 324; cost estimates, 319, 325, 330, 396n115; difficulties in, 293, 300, 304, 320, 322, 330; distribution issues, 300, 304; FCDA initiates, 294, 296–301, 392n14; feasibility testing, 293–294, 315; federal funding for, 297, 299–300, 392n14; federal-state relations and, 294, 295–297; Gaither Committee on, 317–319, 320; location considerations, 296, 297, 300, 301, 330, 392n12; MPAC advises on, 302–303; NSRB proposes, 296–297; objectives defined, 297; Operation Alert reveals shortcomings, 298–299; in pandemic response, 336, 398n16; responsibility and authority issues, 294, 295–297, 303–304; supply-requirements balance sheet for, 301, 304, 306; surgical supplies, 296, 305; system vulnerability analysis in, 293; vertical analysis in assessing requirements, 323, 397n31. See also emergency resource management; food supply; health resources; population survival; postattack survival requirements
stocks and flows: balance sheet planning and, 108, 109, 187; economic assessment, 50–51, 53; vulnerability assessment, 64, 76, 81–83, 159, 173, 199. See also resource management, material flows analysis
Strategic and Critical Materials Stockpiling Act (1946), 23, 127
strategic bombing theory, 14, 62, 71, 140. See also target selection
Strategic National Stockpile, 336
strategic points, 123, 188, 191; for selective dispersal, 198–199, 200–201
strategic relocation. See dispersal
Strategic Vulnerability Branch (SVB, Army Air Corps), 154–159, 166, 325, 367n56, 369n91; Bombing Encyclopedia, 156–159; creation of, 154, 367n55; East-West Section, 155, 158–159, 368n60
Strategic War Materials Act (1940), 103
Strauss, Lewis L., 298
strikes, labor, 343n36, 345n58
Strope, Walmer, 317, 396n109
Structure of the American Economy (NRC), 351n70
style of reasoning, 30. See also Hacking, Ian
styles of reasoning, 30–31
subsidiarity, 378n107
substitution, 76, 80, 81, 205, 233, 354n144; in personnel of government operations, 124. See also cushion; depth; resilience suburban communities, regional planning and, 42. See also regional planning; urbanization
Summary Report (USSBS), 80–83, 154 supply and demand, 51, 106, 121–122, 337; balance sheet for, 108–111; foreign demand for American military products, 104. See also emergency resource management; resource management, material flows analysis
Supreme Court, on New Deal legislation, 92–93 surveys. See knowledge infrastructure survival. See casualty assessments; population survival Sutermeister, Oscar, 213, 381n159
Swinton, Ernest, 62 Symington, Stuart, 168, 227 Symposium on the Management of Mass Casualties (US Army Medical Service School), 291 systems analysis, development of, 34, 344n41; budgeting approach, 362n157, 366n41; RAND corporation, 15, 35, 370n13 Systems Evaluation Division (NRAC), 342n21 system vulnerability analysis, xii, 42–49, 61, 142, 342n20; essential services, 149–152, 293; facility ratings in, 144–149; inventory of resource data and, 14, 31, 53–54; by local government for civilian mobilization planning, 220–224; by OEP, xv. See also Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at; vulnerability assessment system vulnerability analysis, xii, 42–49, 61, 142, 146, 153–154, 157, 161, 166. See also knowledge infrastructure; punched cards system target potentiality reports, 75, 77–78 target selection: ACTS and, 74, 80, 140–141, 160, 353n95, 367n49; area attacks criticism, 140–141, 368n81; AWPD-1 and, 68–71; Bombing Encyclopedia, 156–159; data handling in, 142, 146, 153–157, 161, 166; EOU on, 74–75, 76, 77, 80, 354n140, 142–143; industrial analysis, 40, 69, 140–141, 152–159, 166–168, 369n84; industrial bottlenecks and shortages and, 62, 66, 76, 82, 100; influence on NDAC resource inventory, 309–310; influence on supply-requirements analysis, 328; interval of time for, 154, 155, 367n53, 368n63; “mobile target” analysis, 371n129; New Deal economists’ work in, 15, 60, 71–79, 101; overlay technique in, 142, 162, 166, 170, 177; power systems, 66–68; precision bombing, 63–64, 160, 163, 167, 368n80; rationalized annihilation, 166; science of flows and, 72, 76, 77–78; Strategic Air Intelligence Section (Army), 367n49; vertical bombing, 121. See also aiming point analysis; Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at; airpower strategists; area analysis; damage assessment; dispersal; economics of target selection; Joint Target Group (JTG); Lowe, James T.; Office of Strategic Services (OSS, formerly Office for the Coordinator of Information); overlay technique; resilience; Strategic Vulnerability Branch (SVB, Army Air Corps); United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS); vital systems disruption, as offensive military tactic Taureck, Rita, 28 taxation: New Deal and, 350n57, 352n74; rapid amortization and benefits for military-industrial production, 99, 103, 129, 131, 210, 359n81; rapid amortization for industrial dispersal, 195, 202, 209, 376n74; rapid amortization for industrial production of essential goods, 392n10 technical rule, 21–22, 345n63, 64 Technological Advances and Consequent Dangers (Kupperman), 8–9 technological advances in nuclear weapons, 300, 301, 302, 320 technological progress in modernity, 8–9, 34, 89. See also computer simulation; damage assessment, computerization of; urbanization technopolitics, 348n105 Teller, Edward, 197 Tennessee Valley Authority, 44, 49 terrorism, xii–xiii, xiv, 63, 347n87, 95; 9/11 attacks, xii, 27, 333
test exercises, 175–176; administrative readiness, 222–223, 225, 237, 241, 267, 379n128, 382n180; for civilian mobilization planning, 222–223, 225, 379n128; for government continuity, 267; for industrial mobilization planning, 175; MPAC on, 265–266; NPA study on, 275; NSRB development of, 255, 387n65; nuclear weapons tests, 139, 184, 207, 298; ODM and, 250, 265–268; standardization of, 334; for state of preparedness, 234. See also feasibility testing; Mobilization Plan D-Minus (1957); models and simulations; Operation Alert exercise (1955)

Tharin, Frank, 271

thermonuclear war. See nuclear preparedness; nuclear weapons

Tilly, Charles, 19

Tiverton, Lord, 62

Tobin, James, 227
total dispersal, 195, 200, 247
total war, 10–11, 17, 25, 39, 71–79; Beers’s OPMG report, 194; mobilization planning assumptions and, 59–60, 62, 253. See also nuclear preparedness

transformation systems, 12–13; bottlenecks, 46, 66, 100, 199, 202; bridges, 64, 151, 319; in feasibility testing, 114; food supply and, 66; Gaither Committee on, 318–319; as industrial production support, 45–46, 61, 149, 150; local civilian mobilization planning for, 172; OPMG on, 192; Plan D-Minus and, 288; regional planning, 43, 45–46; roadside industry, 48; SRI report on post-attack industrial rehabilitation, 230–232; in stockpiling location considerations, 296; WWI and, 349n26. See also railroads

Truman administration, 362n163, 363n199; alert planning and, 238–239; civil defense planning by, 168, 193, 218–219, 363n199, 378n113, 379n134; dispersal issues, 210, 212–213, 215, 237–238; DPA and, 130–131; executive authority controversy during, 123, 378n102; Hopley report and, 225; military spending and rearmament during, 130; mobilization planning decisions, 130–132, 208–210, 219, 378n102, 379n134; NSRB civil defense plans and, 168, 219, 225, 243, 244, 364n207, 379n134; ODM and, 210, 364n207; PAIR project and, 243

Trump, Donald, xviii

Trupner, William, 84, 117, 135, 351n71; BDSA and, 310, 323, 324; CMP and, 122; on MPAC, 384n21; priority ratings and, 105, 116

Tupper, Ernest, 101, 384n21

Tyler, Lyon G., 375n50

Unification of the War and Navy Departments and Postwar Organization for National Security (Eberstadt report), 124–127, 362n179, 363n182, 375n61. See also National Security Act (1947)

United Kingdom, resource management in, 108–109, 110. See also Britain

United States Civil Defense (NSRB civil defense Blue Book), 184–185, 225–227, 295, 373n24, 379n136

United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USBS), 30, 34, 58, 79–83, 271, 355n147; area analysis and, 141, 162; Hiroshima and Nagasaki studies, 163; on industrial resilience, 189–190, 232; nonmilitary defense and, 82, 189, 193; postwar analysis by, 80–81, 82, 154, 189–190. See also target selection

UNIVAC computers, 175, 177, 263, 308, 394n55

Universal Transverse Mercator (UTM) system, 177, 371n127

unprecedented events, 255, 331–332, 333. See also anticipatory knowledge

urban area analysis. See area analysis; nonmilitary defense; target selection

urban dispersal, 184–185, 186, 195, 196, 200, 374n34. See also dispersal

urbanization, 18–19; Progressive reformers on city government, 88–89; urban reform, 343n35, 356n15. See also population security; regional planning

urban vulnerability assessment, 166–173, 244, 251, 374n34, 383n12; Atomic Scientists of Chicago on, 196, 374n38; CDUA on, 168–173, 221; City X and, 182–184; damage assessment, 140, 169–173, 369n91; NYC, 63, 65–67; SRI report, 230–232; target selection and, 166–168; utilities and, 61, 192, 230–232; vulnerability specialists on, xvii, 41, 61; WWI and, 41, 43

US Air Force. See air intelligence; airpower strategists

US Army Medical Service School, 291

USBS. See United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USBS)

utilities. See power and electricity systems; transportation systems; urban vulnerability assessment; vital systems security; water systems

UTM (Universal Transverse Mercator) system, 177, 371n127
vertical analysis: BDSA uses technique of, 323, 397n131; Gaither Committee uses, 318; NDAC vulnerability assessment, 310–311 vertical systems of control of materials, 120–123, 310, 362n156 Victory Plan (Climate Mobilization advocacy group), 339 Victory Program, 110, 111, 113, 339, 360n110 Viner, Jacob, 352n72, 374n35 vital flows. See resource management, material flows analysis vital systems, continuous operation of, 7, 86, 186, 203–208, 217; as basic government obligation, 10, 15–16, 29; dispersal and, 127, 188, 198–199, 209; technical mechanisms developed for, 29; vulnerability assessment for, 150, 189, 332. See also government continuity; national economy vital systems disruption, as offensive military tactic, 60, 61–83, 141, 335n119; airpower’s importance in, 62–64, 152–159; analysis of US systems in absence of data on enemy nations, 65–69; enemy nations, data collection and analysis on, 69–71, 152–153; EOU and, 74–82, 354n140, 355n149, 157; resource evaluation of, 152–153; Soviet systems, 158; US vulnerabilities exposed in study of, 79–83, 158–159. See also Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at; airpower strategists; resilience; target selection vital systems security, 4–5, 8–16, 136, 293, 343n30; biological conceptualization of, 41, 42, 62, 63, 65; biopolitical modernity and, 335; Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists on, 226–227; climate change and, 337–340; communication systems, 12–13, 149, 207, 232, 286, 288; emergency action steps and, 264–265; forms of security, compared, 13; pandemic response and, 335–337; as political rationality, 332–340; “possibilistic” knowledge in, 343n31; as reflexive biopolitics, 8, 10–16; sovereign state security and, 343n30; for unprecedented events, 331–332. See also dispersional; emergency resource management; food supply; health resources; Office of Defense Mobilization (ODM); population survival vulnerability, to enemy attack in US, 79–83, 139–142, 168–173, 354n144; area analysis, 140–141, 142; Atomic Scientists of Chicago on, 196, 374n38; NSRB and, 127–128, 135; SRI report, 229–230; SVB’s East-West Section, 155, 158–159, 368n60. See also nuclear preparedness vulnerability assessment, xi–xii, 79–83, 140, 168–181, 342n20, 364n3; climate change and, 338; continuous operation of vital systems and, 150, 189, 332; by Gaither Committee, 316–319; inventory of resource data, 14, 31, 53–54, 168–169, 173, 176–177; NDAC and, 310; nonmilitary defense planning, 168–173; Operation Alert (1957), 316; OPMG on, 192, 373n20; resource evaluation influence on, 192, 195, 198, 205, 214, 328, 373n20; SRI PAIR report, 229–233; stocks and flows and, 64, 76, 81–83, 159, 173, 199; supply systems, 40, 46–47, 64, 76, 77, 103–104; technology and, 8–9; Washington, DC, 167, 203, 205–207, 237, 262. See also damage assessment; damage assessment, industrial vulnerability; dispersal; industrial vulnerability assessment; interdependencies; resource evaluation vulnerability assessment, models and simulations for, xiii, 12, 170–171, 177–178, 188, 328; computer models, 15, 25, 142–143, 173, 180–181, 369nn12–14; overlay technique in, 15, 45, 142; population survival and, 292–293, 322. See also models and simulations; Project on the Scientific Computation of Optimum Programs (Project SCOOP) vulnerability expertise, 141–143; elements of, 143; vulnerability specialists, 13–15, 34, 342n16. See also expertise “Vulnerability of the United States to Enemy Attack, The” (Kaysen), 139–141 vulnerability reduction, 7, 11, 29–30, 82, 83, 199, 229; climate change and, 338; forms of security, compared, 13. See also dispersal; nonmilitary defense; passive defense measures; population survival; preparedness; stockpiling programs, essential supplies Waldo, Dwight, 344n53 Walker, Jeremy, 343n28 war. See Cold War; Korean War; total war; World War I; World War II War Department, 163, 165, 372n12, 373n23; Internal Security Division, 143–144, 145 warfare state, 134–136
INDEX 447

War Food Administration, 258, 260, 270 war games, 15, 179, 265–266, 267, 277; Bed-sheet proposals, 255; in Britain, 379n128. See also attack simulations; models and simulations; Operation Alert exercise (1955); test exercises
War Health Administration, 260, 265 war mobilization. See demobilization, of wartime agencies and offices; military-industrial production; mobilization planning
war-planning assumptions, shifts in, 342n21, 383n13; Beers's report, 194; Coale on, 200, 375n51; damage assessment modeling, 178, 306–307; MPAC and, 255; by NSC, 251–252, 253, 287; ODM and, 253, 256–257; Plan D-Minus and, 256–257, 283; total war and, 59–60, 62, 253; unprecedented events, 255; urban and industrial vulnerabilities, 190, 200, 205, 213
War Powers Act (1942), 23, 129, 130, 359n69 War Production Board (WPB), 83, 84, 131, 370n13, 377n99, 384n21; creation of, 24, 112; data collection by, 116–120, 145, 201; facility ratings and, 145; flexible organization chart (image), 107; influence on ODM, 257; military-industrial production and, 201; postwar systems analysts and, 366n41; Requirements Committee, 116–117, 120, 121; resource evaluation by, 142, 143–149, 152, 159; Resources Analysis Branch, 146; Resources Protection Division, 365n22; vertical controls in, 310
War Production Board, Planning Committee, 101, 112–123, 132, 36n131; civilian experts, 116–123; Feasibility Committee formed under, 112–115; Feasibility Committee reconstituted as Committee on Control of Flow of Materials, 120–123; production requirements plans by, 115–120; termination of, 123. See also controlled materials allocation plans; Production Requirements Plan (PRP) war strategy. See Air Corps Tactical School (ACTS), system vulnerability analysis at; air intelligence; mobilization planning; target selection
Washington Post and Times Herald, 280 Waste in Industry (study, 1921), 51 water systems, 149, 305, 366n43; Gaither Committee on, 317; OPMG on, 192; SRI PAIR report, 230–232, 233. See also power and electricity systems
World War II, 3, 5, 6, 15, 41; bottlenecks and shortages during, 104–105, 106, 113, 114, 146, 366n26; OEM creation and, 24, 84–86, 100–101; postwar analysis of, 104, 110, 154, 161, 163–164; reorganization authority and, 97; US entry into, 59, 69, 74, 101–102, 111. See also military-industrial production, WWII; mobilization planning, WWII; target selection
Yoshep, Harry, 128, 129, 131; on emergency action steps project, 386n54, 387n57; on NSRB-ODM merger, 249; Our Missing Shield, 374n30

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