

***Captain May – February 23, 2003 – published essay:***

***“Don’t laugh at duct tape; it saves lives”***

Houston Chronicle Outlook, by Captain Eric May

As we poise to attack Iraq, our military leaders worry that our forces will have to survive and function on the “dirty battlefield” of chemical and biological contaminants. They are preparing for that worst-case scenario, which is the best thing to do. Here at home, on the other hand, I’m afraid that too many of us are expecting the best-case scenario – that we will be untouched by the war – which is the worst thing to do. We are negligent in our civil defense.

Take the duct tape squabble as an example. Earlier this month, the Bush administration heightened the nation’s alert status, and gave the specific advice that citizens have emergency supplies, including duct tape and plastic sheeting, in the event of possible chemical or biological attacks on American soil. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, more concerned with the war for the presidency in 2004 than the war for Iraq in 2003, mocked the administration’s ineptitude, saying that it would have to do better than duct tape to protect the American people.

Daschle is wrong. One of the first tricks of survival in a contaminated environment is to seal up a room with duct tape and plastic, breathing the ample inside air until any wind-borne toxins outside have dissipated.

Dismissing Daschle’s argument, I went down to a local hardware store to get supplies a few days ago, only to learn that he had already influenced many shoppers. Duct tape and plastic sheets in hand, I asked the checkout clerk from the back of the line how many people were stocking up on the items. “Not many,” she replied, “duct tape won’t work.” I explained to her why duct tape *would* work. To most of the shoppers in earshot, this seemed to be welcome news, and several of them went back to the shelves for supplies. The hardware store made a handful of dollars in profit, and a handful of people made purchases that could save their lives.

Now is the time for all wise people to come to the aid of... themselves. Civil defense, like all forms of self-defense, is an unpleasant concept. It demands that we accept our own stated reason for going to war: There are evil people in the world who hate and seek to harm us with weapons of mass destruction. We are in a war with terrorists – and terrorists are in a war with *us*. Not just with our service personnel, intelligence agencies and police forces; not just with citizens of our political and financial capitals, but with *all of us*. Terrorists deal in terrifying deeds. They know that a thousand civilian casualties in America are more

devastating to the nation's morale than a thousand U.S. military casualties in Iraq, and may well be easier to inflict.

The Houston area is unquestionably among the top homeland targets for agents of evil. Consider:

- We're the nation's fourth most populous city.
- We're the home of the Johnson Space Center.
- We are the declared home town of the Bush family.
- We have the nation's largest chemical district.
- Our climate enhances the lethality of a chemical attack.

When I was a general staff officer we routinely envisioned worst-case scenarios to test our preparedness. Let's use one for ourselves:

Early one morning there is a massive explosion in the chemical district along our ship channel. Lethal gases, similar to the ones released in the catastrophe of Bhopal, India, erupt into the atmosphere. An early morning inversion temperature gradient – our climatic norm – keeps the toxic cloud on the ground, while gentle southeasterly breezes – again, our norm – blow it northwest inside Loop 610, where our population is most dense. It may reach beyond that. In any case, the toxins would not dissipate until the afternoon, when our atmospheric conditions usually cause ground pollution to rise.

If anyone thinks that my scenario may give the bad guys ideas they haven't already thought of, think again. Terrorists like the ones who simultaneously hijacked four planes and turned them into missiles are smart enough to think of blowing up toxic factories in populous areas. They are constantly thinking of the bad things they can do to us – and we'd better start thinking about them ourselves.

*May, a Houston-based writer, is a former Army Chemical Corps instructor of nuclear, biological and chemical warfare.*

### **Reader Reply:**

Re: *Eric May*'s Feb. 23 Outlook article, "A Dangerous Truth / Don't laugh at duct tape; it saves lives": *May* should throw out the fear propaganda. Any elected government official who promotes fear ought to be voted out of office immediately. Americans should fear nothing except the tyranny taking place in our government.

John Leonard, Houston