

## COA Analysis of Common Survival Strategies

Having spent a lot of years on military planning staffs, I can't help war-gaming scenarios. In short (as you know well) Course of Action ([COA](#)) development is a big part of Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) and is a fairly reliable way of looking at possibilities and choosing likely sequels, given scenarios. In effect, a way of war-gaming out the future. There are a number of horror scenarios that seem to me to be fairly probable and they keep going around and around in my head as I try to sequence them and assign probabilities to each one. I am haunted by the possible future, an occupational hazard for a professional planner. I sincerely hope our civilization outlives me because it's failure could be truly horrible.

I agree completely with you on relocation to safer areas and stocking a remote retreat in the hinter-boonies. That's the optimum solution and in worst case situations, it's really the only solution likely to work long term. Any of your readers stuck in less than optimum situations are going to make a valiant effort to survive, but their odds are not as good. I am one of these folks. I worry about the golden hoard more than anything else. I would like to pass on some thoughts on the subject of what the unwashed masses will be doing after [TEOTWAWKI](#). I am only guessing, but my guesses are made using history as a template. If anyone disagrees with my analysis, I would love to hear about it.

What about those totally unprepared? What are they going to do? There are many survival strategies open to the unwashed masses other than sitting down and starving to death. We all need to compare our own plans with these other strategies because I guarantee some of these strategies will be used by the teeming masses. When the power grid drops and the food shipments end, the average citizen is going to get a huge shot of reality. Guessing what they are going to do [WTSHTF](#) is central to all other survival planning, especially in the Eastern US or Europe.

### ASSUMPTIONS:

I am talking here about a total collapse situation, not a slow slide decline or regional disruption. You can pick your own favorite cause from an [EMP](#) event to a finance system failure. They all cause roughly the same sequence of events. The results of any catastrophic collapse could easily be worse than any fiction you have ever read. The worst case scenarios all result in disruption of services and quick spiral into anarchy, but leave most of the population alive and hungry. This is the stuff of nightmares.

To recap our unprecedented bad situation: The vast majority of people live in urban or suburban areas near large population centers. They are poorly prepared for any emergency and completely unable to live self sufficiently. The food production systems that currently supply their food are fragile and subject to catastrophic failure. Most people's very lives depend on a fragile triad made up of the transportation network, power grid and finance system. All three of these systems depend on the other two and they are all three unbelievably fragile. (There are many dependencies, but I see these as the three key points of failure.)

Most people currently live shoulder to shoulder in unthinkable crowding. Once the triad of services breaks down, the vast majority of people will suddenly be living on a very limited amount of capital in the form of the tiny amount of consumables on hand in each city. Once the Evian is gone and the

toilets don't work, they will have no way to get drinking water or even dispose of their own sewage. They are literally less than a week away from serious acute hunger.

This situation will not get better unless the government is able to restore critical systems very quickly. The odds of restoring order get worse the longer the crisis lasts as the teeming masses start migrating and civil order disintegrates. Assuming the government fails, the countryside cannot feed the population of the USA without modern fuel, finance, power and distribution systems in place. Using 19th century techniques (where that is possible), the farmland in the USA cannot begin to feed everyone. (Europe has the same problem). In short, people are living where there will be no resources and farmland (and farmers) will be overtaxed just to support locals. We don't have the capital goods (horses, tack, hand plows, tools, seeds etc ) or skills to go back to old farming methods quickly. The math points to a die-off larger than anything recorded in history. Did I miss any main points?

People are not going to starve to death quietly. They never do unless there is a government to enforce it. Every last one of them is going to try *something* to survive or even just hang on one more day. Humans are survivors. They are intelligent, ruthless and deadly omnivores. We use the terms "sheeple", or "Joe Six-pack" pretty flippantly, but even the most stupid human is very dangerous and many of the "sheeple" are not stupid or incompetent. They are, in fact, the most dangerous predators on earth. You are much better off surrounded by hungry tigers than hungry humans. On the other hand, these are real people that used to be your neighbors, mothers, fathers, daughters. When you look them in the face it's going to be very hard to pull a trigger.

#### AVAILABLE STRATEGIES:

This is not an all inclusive list. People are going to try **all** of these concurrently. I expect to see a general sequence of strategy choices, but it's not iron clad. While you would expect it much later in the crisis, you might run into a professional army on day one! The interplay of each strategy with the others is also hard to predict. People are going to try other things too (That I haven't thought of). Local variables will effect how each strategy plays out and what events are likely to occur. The interplay of all these activities is where my analysis breaks down in complexity. You have to evaluate them with local variables, so generalizations can only go so far. I believe people will try all of these strategies. Some of them will work, but most of them will fail. There are only so many resources.

1. Begging/bartering. This is probably the first strategy you will encounter. Begging will go on until the very end. This strategy is open to everyone. It will work better for weak individuals, but ultimately, charity is going to dry up as resources get tighter. The vast majority of people who depend solely on begging will ultimately starve to death. (Unfortunately, most people will beg, barter, steal and kill, in that order. Even a single mother may cut your throat to save her children.)

PLANNING NOTE: In a total meltdown, the numbers will crush you if you let them. You have stored a finite amount of food, but there is an almost infinite number of beggars out there. Can you turn away a family with children who only want a bite to eat? You better think this out carefully and steel yourself for whatever you decide to do. If you give too many of your supplies away you will starve. If you turn everyone away, you may feel really bad. Think about it. How are your wife and kids going to react to begging? Watching a die-off is going to be tragic.

a. Bartering services. This could be prostitution or offering to act as security guard. This is actually a viable strategy for anyone with end-of-the-world useful skills. Find someone (or preferably a community) with food and sell yourself. If you have military training and equipment or specific skills, this could work. I don't expect all the doctors to starve.

b. Bartering goods. Rich people may try to buy basic supplies at scalper's prices. You might get a great deal on a Rolex or Mercedes.

2. Stealing/looting. This is a no-brainer once law enforcement breaks down. Even while there is some order, people are going to steal anything they can get their hands on, even at the risk of being hurt or killed. If we drop into anarchy, expect crowds of hungry people or "professional rioters" to sweep the city streets. As the public-access shops and warehouses begin to empty, crowds may move into residential areas for a while, but I don't expect this to last long. Big crowds will probably disband completely when resources become more scarce or they have to travel further to get to them. A warehouse of food or shopping center near the inner city may support this behavior, but a suburban neighborhood 10 miles away won't. Residential areas within cities may be in serious peril. The closer you are to densely populated areas and/or poor areas, the more peril you face. Once the big flash-crowds disappear or people start to forage in the suburbs, small groups will splinter off and begin raiding (see item #5 below).

There will also be a lot of solitary (or small groups) burglars and sneak-thieves. If you keep chickens in your yard, watch your neighbors closely. If you plan to go to work and leave your house empty, it may be looted while you are away. Gasoline tanks without locks will be prime targets for night visitors. Suburban gardens are prime targets. This applies to slow-slide declines too.

Beggars can turn into looters quickly if nobody is watching. If nobody answers a door, they may try to break a window. The suburbs may be swamped with beggar/looters. As they get more desperate, looters will get bolder and more dangerous. The further out of town you live the safer you will be from this group. Of course, the more isolated you are, the more vulnerable you are to raiders.

3. Some people will sit tight and wait for things to somehow return to normal. Most people who have food and other resources will try to live on them and wait it out. If they stay in small family groups, they will be easy prey for mobs or raiders. Still, I expect most urbanites will do this until they are almost out of resources...then they will join the beggars and looters. This group will grow smaller every day and swell the numbers of looters.

4. Banding. Almost all people will band together for mutual protection and support. How well this works depends on many factors, but ultimately the only safety anywhere will be provided by numbers. Single survivors will get swallowed up quickly.

a. Banding by family unit. This is the basic family group and will be the the first and most common grouping. These groups are small in size but very cohesive. Most families will quickly band with other families into larger groups. The ones who don't will be easy prey.

b. Banding by geography. Neighborhoods will try to form bands for mutual protection. Neighborhoods will try to do this, but historically, this is often not very effective, especially if the distance between neighbors is large. Sharing of resources within neighborhood bands is spotty and

as individuals run low, they tend to leave. Rural neighborhood watches are doomed by small numbers, and urban neighborhood watches are doomed from having too many people.

Populations of small towns will band together to put up road-blocks and keep from being overwhelmed. This is the only way most small communities will be able to survive, even if they are capable of supporting themselves by farming. Unless they band effectively and very quickly, they are doomed to be overrun by refugees or raiders. Even the communities who quickly band together may get soft hearted and let in too many people to support. I think pitiful refugees are more dangerous than raiders. It's a rare American who can watch genuine suffering and not try to help. This is especially dangerous if it looks as though the situation could improve and things go back to normal. If there is hope of getting help from outside the community, most people are inclined to save as many others as possible. I feel that this issue will doom many small communities.

**PLANNING CONSIDERATION:** If your plans include banding with a farming community, you must take steps **immediately** to close off the flow of refugees into the area. Convincing others to take steps this drastic will be hard or even impossible, especially early in a crisis. Closing your community and isolating it may very well be impossible. If it is, you are at the mercy of fate and geography. You had better have a plan-b.

c. Banding by profession. Cops, medical workers, emergency workers, soldiers, and perhaps factory workers may band with co-workers. You will especially see this behavior with professional military groups. Beware of military installations in a total breakdown! You have a lot of very young, very scared and highly trained young men with no families there. It might get very dangerous to be near a military town if the government totally disappears. (In a slow slide disaster or regional disaster Army Towns are perhaps the safest places to be, but once the chain of command disappears, watch out.)

d. Banding by religion. This is perhaps the easiest, most effective band to join, since the churches already congregate groups of like-minded people within a small area. Religious bands will probably be the basis for "small community group banding" and are usually the strongest bands possible to form on short notice. All the church groups in an area or a town will likely band together and put on the mantle of "local government". I anticipate local churches forming the backbone of most local governments. They will be equipped with arm bands and represent "legitimate" government when they come to loot your supplies. Joining one of these bands will be a good survival strategy for many people, but in a total collapse, they are very likely to keep as many people alive as possible until they run out of resources and then starve together. Expect to see local polities formed from church groups going to war as resources get scarce. They will go after both looters and hoarders. Fascism in America will probably arrive carrying a cross.

e. Banding by racial or ethnic group. You will see racially or ethnically pure groups in some regions. This could be very important factor in places like Los Angeles or New York almost immediately and may take precedence over geography or religion. It's an ugly thought, but being the wrong color may be a death sentence some places. (Ironically, I don't expect any serious racial tension in the deep South.)

f. Banding by gang or club affiliation. Not only urban gangs and bikers, but also gun-clubs, country clubs, and survival groups fall into this category. Some clubs will obviously not band effectively in

an emergency (like a yacht club for instance), but you can bet the Aryan Brotherhood will cleave together like real brothers. Your survival group, can form a strong group if you have like minds and have clear plans for how to band, where to meet etc.

(PLANNING NOTE: Unfortunately, you are very unlikely to be able to form a survival group large enough to defend yourselves. You may have more success joining your survival group with a local church group or community group or some other band to increase your numbers. The only way you will be able to do that is to store enough food. Plan this out carefully. How big is your optimum band size and how will you feed everyone? Remember, you can use the same tactics other groups will use...like confiscation of warehouses, if your numbers are large enough and you are quick enough. But, If your ultimate size gets too large it will become unwieldy and impossible to control or feed. This is a conundrum you need to give some thought to now.)

Consider this topic well because your group belief system will vary depending on how you form the group and who you let in. A church group will have to use different tactics than a biker club or a neighborhood watch. This will limit or shape your options and set the tone of everything you do. No church group is going to seriously consider cannibalism, for instance.

5. Raiding/Banditry. Raider bands are going to spring up everywhere. Some will start as low level looters and graduate into larger scale violence. Some, however will start out as systematic raiders. There are some very bad perpetrators out there and there will be even more once the prisons empty. In the short term, violence will be very lucrative.

Raiders will take casualties over time. They will also replenish their numbers somewhat, but fortunately these are mostly anti-social types and may have trouble integrating new members. The further you are from them at the start, the safer you will be, but they can hit you anywhere, anytime. I don't see a good solution for this other than sheer numbers or good [OPSEC](#). They won't attack an obviously hard target. and of course, they can't attack what they don't know about. They have to win to stay in business, so they won't attack unless they feel they can win. Distance will spread out the number of groups and allow other survivors to thin their numbers in numerous gun battles. True raiders may not last long, but they are going to be a real problem in the short term.

I expect raiding to take two main forms. The roadside ambush and the home invasion. Home invasions are always dangerous and often brutal. If the raiders attack your home, they will try to take you by surprise and kill every combatant in the house before anyone can react. They will force every more at a very fast pace to prevent you from reacting. They may use some kind of distraction or disguise to gain surprise. Home invasion, carried out with professionalism and gusto is fairly safe and easier than you would think. Expect to see some of them wearing body armor, dressed in police uniforms and carrying badges. (Some of them will have professional entry training...like [SWAT](#) and military). Failing at a stack entry, they may use [CS](#) gas to drive out the occupants. Failing that, they will use fire.

Waylaying travelers on the roads is very easy and safe. Cars are just too vulnerable to gunfire. The roads outside small communities could be very dangerous to travel.

Don't ever underestimate the vile depravity of human beings. Anarchy is the dirtiest word in the English language. Rape and torture may be common. I believe as food gets harder to find, many

people will turn to cannibalism to sustain themselves. (I wish this were not true, but historically, it's very common.) I am not advocating cannibalism in any way, but in all fairness, cannibalism can greatly extend a group's supply base. There are a whole lot of people out there and people are made of meat. While easy targets are available, some groups may prosper for some months eating human flesh. It could be a fairly successful strategy for some groups. Beware. History of other collapses warns us that this may be common.

A longer term problem you should watch for is what I call "part time raiders". Historically, most raids have been conducted by young men in one community raiding a nearby community. This phenomenon won't happen overnight in most places but it will probably happen eventually unless somebody forms a central authority within a year or two.

6. Extortion. Outlaw bands will give way to professional armies in some places. Possibly with a core of military trained personnel, a hundred or more killers traveling together can extort more than smaller groups can steal. These groups will get larger as time goes by but they are doomed unless they can take over someone else's farmland and extort "taxes". You may see groups like this move in to agricultural areas and set up shadow governments, taxing all the farmers nearby...or selling protection. Anyone who doesn't play ball will be burned out. Expect them to use classic tactics like assassination, kidnapping, and terrorism to cow the locals. Local governments are going to probably hire many thugs and enforcers too. Telling the good guys from the bad guys might get difficult. Anyone trying to take your food is probably a bad guy, but it might be worth your while to pay him off.

7. Hiding. Some people are going to try to hide from the die-off.

Hiding inside a city or suburbs (in my opinion) is not going to work. People are going to systematically search every building for food. You could conceivably scare off or outfight wave after wave of looters and finally be looted by a local government or burned out by a large gang or rioters. The fact that you are living there will be impossible to hide when they try to search your building. If you are there, you will eventually have to fight or surrender your supplies. Hiding in the suburbs is just not possible and staying in an apartment building (even if you band with the other occupants for mutual protection) will eventually get you killed.

Hiding in a rural area is possible, just because of the distances involved. The number of hungry mouths will be less in the country, but local citizens are still going to confiscate your "Hoarded" food if they need it. Your best hiding place is in an area that will be defended by well-fed people. (but if you have a well-fed community defending you, you should really help them defend it, don't you think?)

The second best hiding place is a wilderness area with no roads or natural resources that someone will want. A wilderness hide site takes a lot of skills to pull off. Also, it is not sustainable without some planning and a lot of discipline. Essentially, this is hunkering down in a remote place and eating supplies you brought with you while you wait patiently for the teeming masses to die off. Living quietly in the wilderness, mostly underground is a hard way to live, especially in bad weather, but it could be your best chance to miss the die-off if you are healthy and have a solid set of outdoor tactical skills.

8. Bug out (presumably to a safe place).

This is going to be very popular, even for people who have no place to go. Once the power is off and the sewage starts backing up, the cities are going to start losing people. The exodus may begin immediately or be delayed several days (depending on the scenario). Either way, the refugees will generally try to leave in family groups. They will mostly follow interstates, highways, state roads, and farm roads, in that order. Nobody (almost nobody) is going to just start walking in a random direction and go cross country. They will drive until they have to walk and try to re-supply along the way.

While there is order, the roads may be jammed with cars leaving the cities going *nowhere*. In practice, almost everyone is going to be driving out of the city with a definite destination in mind. Some relative, some small town they know of, etc. Most of these destinations are going to be just as bad as the ones they just left, but these will be desperate people. Many of them are going to seriously overestimate their vehicle range. (Traffic jams eat a lot of fuel, probably more than most people will plan for).

Most of those thousands of cars on the interstate are going to run out of gasoline in a matter of hours and wherever they finally run out, that's where the occupants are going to start walking. Of course most of them are going to pull off the highways and interstates just before they run out and mob every town along the highway. (This is a historic fact, proven by every hurricane evacuation we have ever attempted). I expect people to turn very nasty when they run out of fuel. When they cannot buy fuel or food, the towns along America's highways will be filled with armed, hungry desperate people who may kill for a gallon of gas or a drink of water. Sound like fantasy? Don't bet on it. It's happened even during regional crisis with help on the way. In a general meltdown, I expect lots of violence in small towns and strip communities along highways and especially interstates.

There may be long columns of desperate refugees walking the interstates, but I don't foresee this. Most people will congregate in towns along the route. It's difficult to predict what desperate people will do without knowing local variables. If there is a hopeful destination within perceived walking distance, I would expect a lot of foot traffic. Of course, there will be a large number of breakdowns, but probably no mass migrations on foot unless they are being chased by something like a fire or chemical spill etc.

PLANNING NOTE: If you wait too long to **G.O.O.D.** you won't make it. I believe G.O.O.D. movement of any kind is going to be very dangerous. Moving vehicles are just too vulnerable, and there are going to be a lot of desperate, armed people stranded on the roads. This specifically includes law enforcement. They are *not* going to let you drive by with a load of gas cans in the back when their patrol car is sitting empty. Get out early or don't try it.

9. Going on with your life and ignoring the crisis.

I think this will be a very popular early response. Some people will still try to make it to work, just like they always have. Until the crisis really gets bad, you will probably see shopkeepers, lawyers, bankers etc trying to commute to work. I really hope the police and firemen do this for as long as possible--and garbage collectors and power workers too! In fact, this is probably our best defense against a general melt-down. If everyone would stay calm and keep trying to make the system work, our society could survive almost anything. (I am betting on the exact opposite).

10. LaMOE (LAsT Man On Earth) of the wilderness.

Some people will grab their outdoors gear and head for the woods planning to live out of a rucksack and forage or hunt for their food. I include fishermen in this category. I expect the wilderness areas to be absolutely stiff with "sportsmen" who are going to try to camp their way out of trouble. Maybe not, but I have heard a lot of people talk about it. This is a losing proposition, but that's not obvious to everyone.

**PLANNING CONSIDERATION:** If you attempt to hide in a wilderness location, you are going to have to avoid these knuckleheads. Choose your hide site well.

11. Throw yourself on the mercy of the government.

Another VERY popular option. America has become the land of the entitlement. This generation seems to believe the government is there to take care of them from cradle to grave. I expect lots of folks to gather around anything even remotely resembling government. This will only last while government offices are open, but it might allow formation of groups or bands that will later loot and burn the city.

12. Go nuts and start burning everything in sight. It's happened before and will probably happen again. For some reason, arson seems to be some kind of release mechanism for unstable personalities. These folks are yet another reason to avoid urban areas. They won't last long, but they can cause a lot of damage in the short term.

13. Something else. This is only a partial list of all the possible strategies people will use. If you can think of something, expect someone to try it. Look at your local variables and think about it.

#### EXPECTED SEQUENCE:

Tricky, but in general terms, I expect urbanites to hang onto their city as long as supplies hold out and then attempt a bug-out. Some, of course, are going to bug out almost immediately. Some will never bug out.

Most people are going to sit tight until they get hungry and then either attempt a bug-out or try to barter/beg/or loot food.

Looters will start looting as soon as they can get away with it. Their numbers will be fairly small in the beginning, but will grow as more people get hungry. They will continue until there is nothing to loot...then they will have to change strategies. The next strategy up the scale is raiding.

Most people will never make that transition to violence, but I estimate up to 5% of the total population will easily make that transition and another 10% are capable of doing it if they have more time to get used to the idea (and get hungry). These numbers are not really supportable historically, but I feel that they are very close to reality...just personal opinion. If I am right, that means even a city of 100,000 people could produce 5,000 potential murderers in a few days. That's a lot of bad guys.

Raiders, bandits and bad guys are going to prey on the weak until somebody establishes order or they run out of easy targets. This order will probably be in the form of locally formed polities (local governments and committees, neighborhood watches, and church groups.) Once we reestablish real order, most remaining raiders are going to try to change strategies. Some of them may join your church.

Unfortunately, the horrible die-off will encompass multiple years. It won't end until local communities reach equilibrium and produce as much food as they consume. That could easily take more than two years. (The first harvest after a major crisis is going to be a disappointing time for some communities.) Some of the starving polities (probably after the first harvest) may choose war over starvation and attack neighbors. Sounds really grim, but I call em like I see em.

Livestock mortality the first two years is going to be astronomical. People are going to have to literally allow other humans to die while they feed livestock. Also, they are going to be very valuable commodities and prone to theft.

Wildlife and fish mortality will also be very high. Everybody who sees a deer will attempt to kill it. After a year or two, I expect deer, bear and wild hogs to be nearly extinct in the Eastern US. Small game will also suffer huge losses to poaching and so will fish.

#### SO, WHAT STRATEGY DO I PLAN TO USE?

I live in a nice suburban neighborhood of a small town within 45 minutes of a large urban area. The area surrounding us is a poor rural agricultural area in Southern Georgia. My town is near a secondary line of drift from Savannah. Not the worst place to live, but not good either. In a slow slide scenario, I will stay in place, participate in the neighborhood watch and go to work every day. I even have plans to set up a soup kitchen, field bakery and water purification plant at a local church if needed. My plan is to make myself valuable to the community. If things get really bad, I have the ability to arm up to 6 others. I have enough spare stored food, equipment and weapons to do this and still be postured for plan-B.

Plan-B. In the event of a TEOTWAWKI I intend to use several options. I intend to Bug out with a truck-load of supplies to a pre-selected wilderness area (within 15 minute ride of home), establish a hide site and wait out the carnage. (I have about seven months supplies for my family plus a couple of caches with extra food and weapons nearby for a total of roughly nine months of rough living. I believe our odds of remaining unnoticed for six or more months are very good while maintaining a fairly high standard of living. (Living this close to Savannah, this is the best plan I could come up with).

Why hide out? first, I have the skills, equipment and a good area. But mostly, I know myself. Having seen real hunger in Africa and the Balkans, I don't believe I have the emotional hardness to watch people suffer and die without joining them by trying to help. Hiding out and missing the die-off will be hard, but watching it happen (for me) is just impossible. I can't watch.

When things cool down, I will scout the area and attempt to barter my skills to local farmers or whoever is in power. (I have acquired quite a few barterable skills over the years). So, if I show up at your retreat door six months after a collapse looking for work: don't shoot! It's just me! - JIR