

MOVING PARTS OF GOVERNMENT MAKES SENSE

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I'm thinking the unthinkable.

What happens to our democratic structure if Washington, D.C., is destroyed during a nuclear attack?

Last week the Senate heard testimony exploring that grim possibility.

"In an age of terrorism and a time of war, this is no longer mere fodder for Tom Clancy novels and episodes of 'The West Wing.' These nightmare scenarios are serious concerns after 9/11," said Sen. John Cornyn, a Republican from Texas, and chairman of the subcommittee on the Constitution. He suggested the aftermath would include a constitutional crisis -- especially if more than one government official claimed the presidency.

One thorny issue involves the constitutionality of the current line of succession. A 1947 law moves from vice president to speaker of the House and Senate president pro-tempore, before installing a member of the Cabinet as a logical replacement. Some scholars say the framers clearly intended for a Cabinet officer to be named acting president -- not a member of the legislative branch -- and the law should reflect that.

There's a lot of good thinking out there on this issue, ranging from the privately funded Continuity of Government Commission to Washington's Rep. Brian Baird, an Olympia Democrat.

Baird has suggested several alternatives for replacing members of Congress -- at

least temporarily -- if something terrible should happen.

But it's always difficult to get folks to think about "what if?" It's even tougher to translate those thoughts into law (or in some cases, the even more difficult challenge of a constitutional amendment). Could members of Congress write a sort of political will designating temporary heirs?

Moving beyond the morbid, I've got a low-rent idea that doesn't require much in the way of legislation.

We ought to move some of the government out of Washington.

There are some government agencies -- State, Treasury, Defense, Justice and Homeland Security -- that make sense to keep around the president and Congress.

But what about others?

I'd move the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to Seattle. The Northwest is a region that cares about the issues, and it's a place where quality employees easily could be hired.

The agency administrator could "attend" Cabinet meetings via the Internet and travel to the capital when absolutely necessary (it's not like agency bosses don't travel all the time now).

The EPA administrator is not currently on the list to succeed the president. So more government agencies might be relocated.

Why not transfer the Interior Department to Denver? Managing the nation's parks, resources and collaborating with American Indian tribal governments sure would be a lot easier if the agency was closer to the action.

Perhaps Kansas City, Mo., would work for the Agriculture Department. Atlanta for Health and Human Services, where

the Centers for Disease Control are already established. And Chicago seems like a Housing and Urban Development kind of town.

We might even match a government relocation effort with another national interest -- closing underused military bases. The states or regions that face base closure might move up the list for the new headquarters for the Transportation Department. (That is one department that I am quite certain won't be heading to Seattle.)

Cynics might come up with another plan: They'd pick the new home for Cabinet agencies based on political considerations, such as electoral votes. Who knows? It wouldn't work for me, but Florida might be considered for the Department of Education. Then, that notion alone is almost enough to toss out this idea.

But I wonder, aside from the continuity question, if there wouldn't be another benefit: Could decentralization improve government?

Agency administrators might have some time away from the Congress and national media to actually get some work done. They'd get a better appreciation for regional thinking if they heard stories that differ from those in the Beltway, and experience life outside of Washington.

On second thought, the Transportation Department should be headquartered in Seattle. I'd love to hear Secretary Norman Mineta complain about being stuck on an Eastside bridge. Or he might get an earful from someone stuck on Interstate 5 -- or from an assistant who missed the only remaining ferry from the West Sound.

Then the federal government might better understand how things work outside Washington. And at least some of government would be ready -- just in case.