

Retreat (survivalism)

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A **retreat** is a place of refuge for those in the survivalist subculture or movement. A retreat is also sometimes called a **bug-out location (BOL)**. Survivalist retreats are intended to be self-sufficient and easily defended, and are generally located in sparsely populated rural areas.

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History

While fallout shelters have been advocated since the 1950s, dedicated self-sufficient survivalist retreats have been advocated only since the mid-1970s. The survival retreat concept has been touted by a number of influential survivalist writers including Ragnar Benson, Barton Biggs, Bruce D. Clayton, Jeff Cooper, Cresson Kearny, James Wesley Rawles, Howard Ruff, Kurt Saxon, Joel Skousen, Don Stephens, Mel Tappan, and Nancy Tappan.

1960s

With the increasing inflation of the 1960s, the impending US monetary devaluation, the continuing concern with possible nuclear exchanges between the US and the Soviet Union, and the increasing vulnerability of urban centers to supply shortages and other systems failures, a number of primarily conservative and libertarian thinkers began suggesting that individual preparations would be wise. Harry Browne began offering seminars in 1967 on how to survive a monetary collapse. He worked with Don Stephens, an architect, survival bookseller, and author, who provided input on how to build and equip a remote survival retreat. He provided a

copy of his original *Retreater's Bibliography* (1967) for each seminar participant.

Articles on the subject appeared in such small-distribution libertarian publications as *The Innovator* and *Atlantis Quarterly*. It was also from this period that Robert D. Kephart began publishing *Inflation Survival Letter*^[1] (later renamed *Personal Finance*). The newsletter included a continuing section on personal preparedness by Stephens for several years. It promoted expensive seminars around the US on the same cautionary topics. Stephens participated, along with James McKeever and other defensive investing, hard currency advocates.

1970s

In 1975, Kurt Saxon began publishing a newsletter called *The Survivor*, which advocated moving to lightly populated regions to "lie low" during a socio-economic collapse, and setting up fortified enclaves for defense against what he termed "killer caravans"^{[2][3]} of looters from urban areas.

In 1976, Don Stephens popularized the term "retreater" and advocated relocating to a rural retreat when society breaks down.

Writers such as Howard Ruff warned about socio-economic collapse and recommended moving to lightly populated farming regions, most notably in his 1979 book *How to Prosper During the Coming Bad Years*, a best-seller in 1979.

For a time in the 1970s, the terms "survivalist" and "retreater" were used interchangeably. The term "retreater" eventually fell out of favor.^[4]

One of the most important newsletters on survivalism and survivalist retreats in the 1970s was the *Personal Survival ("P.S.") Letter* (circa 1977-1982) published by Mel Tappan, who also authored the books *Survival Guns* and *Tappan on Survival*. The newsletter included columns from Tappan himself, as well from Jeff Cooper, Al J. Venter, Bill Pier, Bruce D. Clayton, Rick Fines, Nancy Mack Tappan, J.B. Wood, Dr. Carl Kirsch, Charles Avery, Karl Hess, Eugene A. Barron, Janet Groene, Dean Ing, Bob Taylor, Reginald Bretnor, C.G. Cobb, and several other writers, some under pen names. The majority of this newsletter revolved around selecting, constructing and logistically equipping survival retreats.^[5] Following Tappan's death in 1980, Karl Hess took over publishing the newsletter, eventually renaming it *Survival Tomorrow*.

1980s

Survivalist retreat books of the 1980s were typified by the 1980 book *Life After Doomsday*^[6] by Bruce D. Clayton, advocating survival retreats in locales that would minimize fallout, as well as specially constructing blast shelters and/or fallout shelters that would provide protection in the event of a nuclear war.

1990s

Several books published in the 1990s offered advice on survival retreats and relocation. Some influential in survivalist circles are *Survival Retreat: A Total Plan For Retreat Defense* by Ragnar Benson, *Strategic Relocation—North American Guide to Safe Places* by Joel Skousen, and *The Secure Home*, (also by Skousen).

2000 to present

In recent years, advocacy of survivalist retreats has had a strong resurgence after the terrorist attacks on the

World Trade Center in New York City in 2001, the 2002 attacks and 2005 attacks in Bali, the 2004 Madrid train bombings in Spain, and the 2005 public transportation bombings in London.

Several books published since 2000 advocate survival retreats and relocation. Some that have been particularly influential in survivalist circles are *How to Implement a High Security Shelter in the Home* by Joel Skousen, *Rawles on Retreats and Relocation* by James Wesley Rawles, and *Life After Terrorism: What You Need to Know to Survive in Today's World* by Bruce D. Clayton.^[7]

Online survival websites, forums, and blogs (such as SurvivalBlog) discuss the best locales for survival retreats, how to build, fortify, and equip them, and how to form survivalist retreat groups.^[8]

Economic troubles emerging from the credit collapse triggered by the 2007 US subprime mortgage crisis have prompted a wider cross-section of the populace to modify their homes as well as establish dedicated survival retreats.^[9] James Wesley Rawles, the editor of SurvivalBlog was quoted by the *New York Times* in April 2008 that "interest in the survivalist movement 'is experiencing its largest growth since the late 1970s'". He also stated that his blog's conservative core readership has been supplemented with "an increasing number of stridently green and left-of-center readers."^[9]

Necessity of retreats

Mel Tappan was quoted in 1981 by then AP correspondent Peter Arnett that: "The concept most fundamental to long term disaster preparedness, in retreating, is having a safe place to go to avoid the concentrated violence destined to erupt in the cities." ^[10]

Common retreat locale parameters

Common retreat locale selection parameters include light population density, plentiful water, arable land, good solar exposure for gardening and photovoltaics, situation above any flood plains, and a diverse and healthy local economy.^[11] Fearing rioting, looting and other unrest, many survivalists advocate selecting retreat locales that are more than one tank of gasoline away from any major metropolitan region. Properties that are not in "channelized areas" or on anticipated "refugee lines of drift" are also touted.^[12]

One of the key goals of retreats is to be self-sufficient for the duration of societal collapse. To that end, plentiful water and arable soil are paramount considerations. Beyond that, a priority is situation on isolated, defensible terrain. Typically, retreats do not want their habitations or structures jeopardized by being within line of sight of any major highway.

Because of its low population density and diverse economy, James Wesley Rawles ^[13] and Joel Skousen ^[14] both recommend the Intermountain West region of the United States as a preferred region for relocation and setting up retreats. Although it has higher population density, Mel Tappan recommended southwestern Oregon, where he lived,^[15] primarily because it is not downwind of any envisioned nuclear targets in the United States.

Mel Tappan was disappointed by the demographics of southwestern Oregon after the survivalist influx of the late 1970s. "Too many doctors and lawyers" relocated to Oregon, and "not enough plumbers, electricians, or carpenters."^[15]

Evacuation to a retreat

While some survivalists recommend living at a rural retreat year-round,^[16] most survivalists cannot afford to do so. Therefore, they rely on keeping a well-stocked retreat, and plan to go there "at the 11th hour", as necessary. They keep a bug-out bag handy, and may have a dedicated **bug-out vehicle** (BOV). This is a vehicle that the owner keeps prepared in the event of the need for an emergency evacuation. Typically a BOV is equipped with a variation on the bug-out bag that includes additional automotive supplies, clothing, food and water. Survivalists tend to favor four wheel drive trucks and SUVs due to their greater off-road abilities. In the event of a nuclear catastrophe, survivalists may opt into maintaining an older vehicle since it most likely lacks critical electronic components that would otherwise be damaged by the electromagnetic pulse that accompanies a nuclear explosion.

Retreat organization

Most survivalist retreats are created by individuals and their families, but larger "group retreats" or "covenant communities" are formed along the lines of an intentional community.

Retreat architecture and security

Jeff Cooper popularized the concept of hardening retreats against small arms fire. In an article titled "Notes on Tactical Residential Architecture" in Issue #30 of P.S. Letter (April, 1982), Cooper suggested using the "Vauban Principle", whereby projecting bastion corners would prevent miscreants from being able to approach a retreat's exterior walls in any blind spots. Corners with this simplified implementation of a Vauban Star are now called "Cooper Corners" by James Wesley Rawles, in honor of Jeff Cooper.^[17] Depending on the size of the group needing shelter, design elements of traditional European castle architecture, as well as Chinese Fujian Tulou and Mexican walled courtyard houses have been suggested for survival retreats.

In both his book *Rawles on Retreats and Relocation* and in his survivalist novel, *Patriots: A Novel of Survival in the Coming Collapse*, Rawles describes in great detail retreat groups "upgrading" brick or other masonry houses with steel reinforced window shutters and doors, excavating anti-vehicular ditches, installing warded gate locks, constructing concertina wire obstacles and fougasses, and setting up listening post/observation posts (LP/OPs.) Rawles is a proponent of including a mantrap foyer at survival retreats, an architectural element that he calls a "crushroom".^[18]

Bruce D. Clayton and Joel Skousen have both written extensively on integrating fallout shelters into retreat homes, but they put less emphasis on ballistic protection and exterior perimeter security than Cooper and Rawles.

Retreat logistics

Anticipating long periods of time without commerce in the future, as well as observing documented history, retreat groups typically place a strong emphasis on logistics. They amass stockpiles of supplies for their own use, for charity, and for barter. Frequently cited key logistics for a retreat include long term storage food, common caliber ammunition, medical supplies, tools, gardening seed, and fuel. In an article titled "Ballistic Wampum" in Issue #6 of P.S. Letter (1979) Jeff Cooper wrote about stockpiling ammunition far in excess of his own needs, keeping the extra available to use for bartering.

In their books, Joel Skousen, Mel Tappan and Howard Ruff all emphasize the need to have a one-year supply of storage food.

Mainstream economist and financial adviser Barton Biggs is a proponent of well-stocked retreats. In his 2008 book *Wealth, War and Wisdom*, Biggs has a gloomy outlook for the economic future, and suggests that investors take survivalist measures. In the book, Biggs recommends that his readers should “assume the possibility of a breakdown of the civilized infrastructure.” He goes so far as to recommend setting up survival retreats: “Your safe haven must be self-sufficient and capable of growing some kind of food,” Mr. Biggs writes. “It should be well-stocked with seed, fertilizer, canned food, wine, medicine, clothes, etc. Think Swiss Family Robinson. Even in America and Europe there could be moments of riot and rebellion when law and order temporarily breaks down.”^[9]

Survivalist retreats worldwide

Survivalist retreats, both formal and informal exist worldwide, most visibly in Australia,^[19] Belgium, Canada,^[20] France,^[21] Germany^[22] (often organized under the guise of "adventuresport" clubs),^[23] New Zealand,^[24] Norway,^[25] Russia,^[26] Sweden,^[27] the United Kingdom^[28] and the United States.^[9]

Government operated retreats

Construction of government-built retreats and underground shelters—roughly analogous to survivalist retreats—has been done extensively since the advent of the Cold War, especially of public nuclear fallout shelters in many nations. The United States government has created Continuity of Government (COG) shelters built by the Department of Defense and Federal Emergency Management Agency ("FEMA"). These include the massive shelter built under the Greenbrier hotel (aka Project Greek Island), military facilities like Cheyenne Mountain Complex, and the Raven Rock Mountain Complex and Mount Weather sites. Other nations' facilities include the Swiss redoubt fortress system and its dual use facilities like the Sonnenberg Tunnel and Norway's Sentralanlegget bunker in Buskerud County.

In fiction

Robert A. Heinlein featured survivalist retreats in some of his science fiction. *Farnham's Freehold* (1964) begins as a story of a small group in a survivalist retreat during a nuclear war. Heinlein also wrote essays such as *How to be a Survivor*^[29] which provide advice on preparing for and surviving a nuclear war, including stocking a fallout shelter and retreat.

Malevil by French writer Robert Merle (1972) describes refurbishing a medieval castle and its use as a survivalist stronghold in the aftermath of a full-scale nuclear war. The novel was adapted into a 1981 film directed by Christian de Chalonge and starring Michel Serrault, Jacques Dutronc, Jacques Villeret and Jean-Louis Trintignant.^[30]

Lucifer's Hammer by Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven (1977) is about a cataclysmic comet hitting the Earth, and a group of people struggling to survive the aftermath.

Patriots: A Novel of Survival in the Coming Collapse by James Wesley Rawles (2009) describes how the lead characters establish a self-sufficient survival retreat in north-central Idaho.

Jericho (2006) is a TV series that portrays a small town in Kansas after a series of nuclear explosions across the United States. In the series, the character Robert Hawkins uses his prior planning and survival skills in preparation of the attacks. Although it is not fortified, the town effectively becomes a large scale retreat, for its

residents.

Further reading

The text of some books discussing survivalist retreats can be found online:

- *Fallout Protection* (1961)^[31]
- *Nuclear War Survival Skills* by Cresson Kearny (1979, updated 1987 version) ISBN 0-942487-01-X
- *Survival Under Atomic Attack* (1950)^[32]
- *Tappan on Survival* by Mel Tappan (1981) ISBN 0-916172-04-X ^[33]
- Textfiles.com archive of articles that circulated online during the BBS era, includes several Kurt Saxon articles from his old newsletter: Article archives (<http://www.textfiles.com/survival/>)

See also

- Blast shelter
- Bug-out bag
- Fallout shelter
- Intentional community
- Survival kit
- Survivalism
- Tsunami house

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Categories: Survivalism | Social movements | Survival skills

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