

FEMA and Trump send out mass “Presidential Alert”

By Patrick Martin
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The Federal Emergency Management Agency carried out a test of a new “Presidential Alert” messaging system that effectively commandeered the cellphones of more than 150 million Americans Wednesday. A text warning similar to local “Amber Alerts” about missing children was displayed on cellphones throughout the country at 2:18 p.m. Eastern time.

The message read, “Presidential Alert. THIS IS A TEST of the National Wireless Emergency Alert System. No action is needed.”

FEMA’s Washington D.C. headquarters initiated the alert, sending it through its Internet-based Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), which connects directly to the major cellphone providers such as Verizon Wireless and AT&T. The providers then redirect the warning to every cellphone on their networks.

The alerts would not show up on phones where the power was turned off at the time, or where users were conducting conversations or data downloads. There were widespread anecdotal reports of inconsistent rebroadcast of the alerts—some people in a large meeting room getting the alerts while others didn’t, despite having similar phones and networks.

FEMA officials and state emergency agencies were reviewing the results in order to prepare a more comprehensive alert the next time the system is tested. A spokesman for the agency said, “All wireless provider gateways acknowledged receipt of the test message.”

Unlike Amber alerts and extreme weather notifications, it is impossible for users to opt out of receiving “Presidential Alerts” from FEMA. The compulsory nature of the notification sparked a lawsuit filed in federal court in New York City, where a judge declined to issue an injunction halting the test.

The plaintiffs claimed that the alert system was a “violation of Americans’ First and Fourth Amendment rights to be free from Government-compelled listening, as well as warrantless, non-consensual trespass into and seizure of their cellular devices.”

They compared it to “hijacking private property for the purpose of planting a Government-controlled loudspeaker in the home and on the person of every American.”

FEMA claimed that despite the title “Presidential Alert,” the Trump White House had nothing to do with the timing or the content of the test, which had been previously scheduled for last month but was postponed because of Hurricane Florence. FEMA would issue the alert at the direction of the president in the event of a national crisis event, such as a military invasion or a major terrorist attack, officials said.

Nonetheless, the timing of the alert, only five weeks before the midterm election, suggests an interest on the part of the White House and the national-security apparatus in increasing popular anxiety and concern over a possible catastrophic event. Given the level of ferocious conflict within the state, such a nationwide alert could be used as part of a more direct intervention of the military and intelligence agencies into American politics, or in response to it.

In previous pre-election periods, when beleaguered administrations faced likely debacles at the polls, they have issued “orange notices” and other warnings of possible terrorism, with the transparent purpose of creating public alarm and generating support for the national-security apparatus, which would benefit the government politically.

While Wednesday’s alert was clearly labeled a test, its impact in spreading confusion and even fear was similar to that of the missile alert in Hawaii at the

beginning of this year, when the state emergency agency sent out a false alarm of an impending missile strike that was only called off after 38 minutes had passed.

Moreover, it takes little imagination to envision the combination of a Hawaii-style false alarm with the nationwide capabilities demonstrated by FEMA on Wednesday. Such an event could well be used as a pretext for a nationwide military mobilization, mass round-ups of potential opponents, and the implementation of wider measures of a police-state character.

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