

Author's note: I am a journalism major and plan on attempting a photo-journalism career when I graduate. I chose this topic because I found the news pieces I encountered humorous and thought-provoking. I was given a chance to voice my opinion on the topic, so I did!

The Gray Band-Aid

During the week of February 10th, local news reported some rather unusual safety precautions suggested by the Department of Homeland Security. In an attempt to empower the national public, the news media announced the newest homeland defense against terrorism: duct tape. That's right, not only can it fix just about anything, it can also stave off bio-terrorism. Or so they say. Could the act of creating a sealed-off environment fashioned from duct tape and plastic sheeting really protect the public from chemical warfare? While Homeland Security makes claims of its usefulness in some situations, the bulk of society can hardly keep from chuckling at the idea, leaving the public with the thought that this tactic is not much more than a feel-good safety precaution.

In a situation where the chemicals could be detected and tracked by security and an alarm issued to the public, the duct tape technique would prove itself useful. The ideal design for using the plastic sheeting and duct tape method is to create a "shelter-in-place," a temporary refuge from chemicals that have been released into the air, by sealing off a single room, including the windows, doors, and ventilation, until the danger has passed. This concept is nothing new to residents who live near the Umatilla Chemical Weapons Depot, who were given government-issue emergency kits, which include plastic and duct tape, since day one. However, the government-issue title does little to assuage the skepticism in the hearts of residents. "Why don't they issue us gas masks instead? If they're gonna protect us, why don't they give us a gas mask?" asked resident Billy Fender (KATU news).

As far as national security goes, officials such as Dr. Grant Higginson, who leads Oregon's anti-bioterrorism efforts, states that such precautions as duct tape are not being considered seriously due to limited usefulness. "There's at least a chance that this could help in some situations," but, "It's difficult to think of terrorist scenarios" where duct tape would prove useful (Oregonian). With all the safety hype going on in the nation today, there is a dim memory lurking in the background: These "shelter-in-place" practices have a historical ring to them. Reminded of the duck-and-cover program of the 1950's, the public today is quick to associate the duct tape precautions with feelings of futility. Looking back on the circumstances of the 50's, the public is likely to also reflect on the duct tape shelters as little more than another way to feel safe when there really isn't much we can do under the circumstances.

As far as sales of duct tape and plastic sheets, despite the general feelings of mediocrity toward the concept, tape and plastic are in high demand as store shelves have been raided by consumers who want to beef up their supplies. Sales are highest on the east coast and in large cities, but local stores such as Home Depot and W.C. Winks Hardware have reported only a five to ten percent increase in sales (Oregonian). Oregonians seem to be less alarmed. Jon Hearron, the general manager of Winks Hardware, simply states, "I think Portlanders are keeping a stiff upper lip" (Oregonian). And why shouldn't they? With a major city like Seattle or a large state such as California parked right next door I see no reason why there would be much too much to worry about initially. The intention to target and strategically devastate areas with a high concentration of people is the main focus of any hostile action that may occur. For this reason, I think that it is highly unlikely that Oregon is the target of such attention.

In the wake of all the excitement about taking steps to be safe, it seems as though some of us forget to think seriously about the real possibility of more attacks, the consequences and amount of security an average citizen can really achieve. While some people go to such extremes as sealing off their entire house with duct tape and plastic as one man in Colorado did, the rest of us seem to be satisfied with our extra purchases of canned goods and batteries. "It's the fear of the unknown," states Darin Vincent, a local West Linn resident. "And it couldn't hurt to have these things anyway" (Oregonian). It leads me to think of the 50's atomic bomb scares, and I wonder if today's precautions will be remembered as another panicked moment in our nation's history, with our duct tape and plastic sealed around our houses like band aids, waiting for the possible wounds to come.

