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REVIEW & OUTLOOK

Mother of All Blackouts

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Saturday marks the anniversary of the blackout that shut down much of the Northeast a year ago. Anyone who lived through that power outage remembers the annoyance of life without lights, air conditioning, TVs, computers and all the other electronic equipment on which a modern society depends. Now, imagine a blackout that lasts for months, or years.

That was the job of the Commission to Assess the Threat to the U.S. from Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) Attack. The commission, created in 2000 to examine the possibility of EMP attack and its aftermath, just delivered a report to Congress. All we can say is, we hope someone in Washington is paying attention.

An EMP attack occurs when an enemy sets off a nuclear explosion high in the Earth's atmosphere. The electromagnetic pulse generated by the blast destroys the electronics and satellites in its field of vision. For a detonation above the Midwest, that could mean the entire continental U.S.

No American would necessarily die in the initial attack, but what comes next is potentially catastrophic. The pulse would wipe out most electronics and telecommunications, including the power grid. Millions could die for want of modern medical care or even of starvation since farmers wouldn't be able to harvest crops and distributors wouldn't be able to get food to supermarkets. Commissioner Lowell Wood calls

EMP attack a "giant continental time machine" that would move us back more than a century in technology to the late 1800s.

The Commission notes that little in the private sector is hardened to withstand EMP attack and that the military has only limited protection. After an EMP assault, the nation would be highly vulnerable to secondary attack by conventional forces or a biological weapon.

China and Russia have the capability to launch an EMP weapon -- and have let us know it. In May 1999, during NATO's bombing of the former Yugoslavia, members of the Russian Duma, meeting with U.S. congressmen to discuss the Balkans war, pointedly noted that a Russian EMP attack would paralyze the U.S. China recently published an article on EMP in a Chinese-language technical journal. To make sure the U.S. got the message, the article appeared in English.

But it's a relatively unsophisticated EMP weapon in the hands of terrorists that really scares the Commission. All it would take is one nuclear warhead attached to a Scud missile launched from a barge off the U.S. coast to shut down much of the country.

The Commission offers a series of recommendations for reducing U.S. vulnerability. It calls for better intelligence, particularly in coastal waters. Also needed are "vigorous interdiction and interception efforts" such as missile defense. Critical components of civilian infrastructure -- especially the electrical power grid -- need to be EMP-hardened. Most new units can be hardened for 1% to 3% of cost if done at the time of design and manufacture. Hardening existing systems can cost 10 times as much.

The EMP study, which came out the same week as the 9/11 Commission's report, got little media attention. It deserves more.

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