

Barbara Kay: This could destroy our civilization, but we don't talk about it

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Menace of war is the “hermit kingdom’s” stock in trade. For the first time, two weeks ago, North Korea threatened an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack on North America that could cause disaster on a scale we can barely imagine—yet a disaster that, unlike an actual nuclear strike, would not directly kill a single human being.

In its sixth and most powerful nuclear test, North Korea has, according to leader Kim Jong-Un, “a multi-functional thermomonuclear nuke ... which can be detonated even at high altitudes for super-powerful EMP attack according to strategic goals.”

By a coincidence non-fiction writers dream of, Toronto Sun columnist and broadcaster Anthony Furey recently published a book on EMP: *Pulse Attack: The real story behind the secret weapon that can destroy North America*. In it he traces EMP history and its effect in “no contact wars” of the future, whether instigated by North Korea, Iran or a terrorist group like the Islamic State.

EMPs are not rocket science—in their implications, I mean. Furey explains in blunt language aimed at the average reader what actually happens when a nuclear bomb is detonated 400 km in the air over a populated area. It involves gamma rays colliding with electrons and other stuff that makes my physics-challenged mind glaze over, but that’s not the main thrust. The meat of the book is disturbingly comprehensible to my high-functioning imagination.

The basic point is that EMPs constitute a brief energy surge that can—with no warning whatsoever and no direct harm to living beings—radically damage or destroy so much of continental North America’s electrical infrastructure that life as we know it would come to a shuddering stop for months on end. Call for help? Your iPhone is fried. Drive to the store for supplies? Your car’s electronic system is out; it won’t move (and even if it did, your local gas station’s pumps are electrical, and they’re dead). Anyway, that store you are headed for has no power and no way to keep food fresh or get more. Your computer’s down, of course. Also controlled by now-useless electronic SCADAs (Supervising Control and Data Acquisition: the “modern equivalents of the Roman aqueducts”): clean drinking water, the sewage system and the natural gas distribution system.

An EMP attack wouldn’t be like the Montreal Ice Storm of 1998, where a slew of transformers went down, but in a relatively limited area and for a limited time, because new transformers were available elsewhere. An EMP attack could put the majority of transformers across the country out of commission, which means rerouting from working transformers as we normally do is not possible. With widespread infrastructure damage, it would be difficult to coordinate the installation of whatever spare transformers were available and undamaged. With maximum damage, a study Furey cites estimates, replacement time might be up to 33 months. With the deprivation this scenario implies, a Hobbesian nightmare of total social breakdown once food and water supplies are exhausted is not scare-mongering: it’s a realistic prediction.

Our understanding of war is mired in the past. We’ve comforted ourselves that MAD (mutual assured destruction) will stop even rogue regimes from launching nuclear strikes for fear of massive retaliation from the U.S., but how do you riposte an EMP strike? With Hiroshima on steroids and the obscene human wreckage that entails? Even Donald Trump would quail at the moral imbalance. Russia has figured that out. During the war in Bosnia, a U.S. congressional delegation to the Balkans was openly taunted by the Russians, saying (essentially, according to a witness’s testimony), “All we have to do is launch one ballistic missile over your country and conduct an EMP attack and that would be the end of America.”

Re-enacting ancient Cassandra’s prophetic role on EMPs is a “thankless task,” according to Peter Pry, a former staff member of the American House Armed Services Committee, who has dedicated the best years of his life to urging action on the EMP file in the U.S. His cautionary tale on the frustrations of crying wolf to no avail when there really is a wolf is one of the highlights of the book. “It’s very politically incorrect to be trying to raise awareness about EMP,” Pry told Furey. The more vocal he became in pointing out weaknesses in government policies under Obama, the more his

career suffered. He and his wife literally lost their family farm over his activism.

The irony in all this is that a few hundred million dollars, a mere bagatelle in the scheme of things, in replacement and additional parts to our utilities system—notably metal Faraday cages that in a further irony bear a striking theoretical resemblance to conspiracy theorists' tinfoil cone hats—could preclude most potential EMP damage. Amazingly, though, as Furey discovered in his research, in Canada there “has never been a single attempt to introduce legislation to protect the grid. The north is fully exposed.”

Who wants to be remembered as prescient after a horrific fact? The poet Francis Bacon nailed it when he wrote, “Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy.”

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