

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2063
September 15, 2008

Congress Should Establish EMP Recognition Day

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The threat of an Electro-Magnetic Pulse (EMP) attack against the United States is credible. Such a strike could have a devastating impact on the nation by disabling electrical systems, grinding the economy to a halt, and possibly resulting in the deaths of millions. Yet other than establishing a commission to study the problem and holding a handful of hearings, Congress has done virtually nothing to address the issue. Such inaction could change virtually overnight, however, if Congress held even one EMP Recognition Day.

The Darkest Hour. An EMP attack is produced by detonating a nuclear weapon launched by a ballistic missile. Such a detonation—occurring high above the earth—produces a massive pulse of ionized particles that could damage many electrical and information systems. An attack would disrupt telecommunications, banking and finance, fuel and energy, food and water supplies, emergency and government services, and more, threatening millions of lives.

If, just for one day, Congress simulated even a fraction of the impact such an attack would have, the scope of the danger would be clear. Here is a short list of what could happen on EMP Recognition Day on the Hill. Congress could:

- *Close all cafeterias.* After an attack transportation networks would grind to a halt and no food would be delivered.
- *Walk to work.* Traffic lights would no longer function, so all roads would be gridlocked. The computer systems operating mass transit would be inoperative.

- *Turn off members' Blackberries.* Satellites in low-earth and many of the communication support systems will be disabled. Devices such as Blackberries and GPS would not work.
- *Shut off the lights.* Critical computers that direct the national electrical grid would be inoperative.

Congress should take just these four steps for one day—and then all the members would understand the magnitude of the dangers posed by an EMP attack.

A Day to Remember. In a speech on March 23, 1983, Ronald Reagan detailed his plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). SDI was aimed at ensuring America's safety against a nuclear missile attack by implementing land and space-based defense systems. Reagan's vision was never completely realized, but the missile threats against the United States have never dissipated, and the need for such a system grows more pressing. A little over 20 years later, a congressionally chartered commission led by Dr. William Graham released a report that detailed an unappreciated dimension of the missile problem: an EMP attack. Thus, March 23 would be an excellent candidate for Congress's EMP Recognition Day.

A Call to Action. EMP Recognition Day would be about more than putting Congress in the dark. It

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/HomelandSecurity/wm2063.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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could promote several tasks the Congress could take now, including:

- *Fund comprehensive missile defense.* Building a comprehensive missile defense system will allow our nation to intercept and destroy a missile bound for the United States regardless of the launch point or whether the attack is aimed at destroying a city or engaging in an EMP attack on the nation.
- *Demand the Administration develop a National Recovery Plan.* In order to minimize lives lost and property destroyed, the United States needs a plan that will address its ability to recover quickly after an attack. The EMP Commission emphasized that our nation must first improve the infrastructure on which all other sectors are dependent, specifically citing electric power and telecommunications. This risk-based approach recognizes that certain infrastructure is key to post-EMP attack recovery. EMP should also be added to the list of 15 disaster scenarios.

- *Require more research on the EMP threat.* More research is needed in order to ensure that the United States fully understands the scope of the danger and cost-effective countermeasures.

Need for Congressional Action. Before Congress ends its session this year, its members should agree to make March 23 EMP Recognition Day. Even if Congress does not stop feeding its staff, turn off the lights, or hitchhike to work, simply recognizing the EMP threat would go a long way toward better preparing America for this grave threat.

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