One Second After: A Book Review from a Prepper's Perspective

Contributed by Jerry Erwin
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The new, apocalyptic novel One Second After deals with an extremely fast crash, being that of an EMP, or Electromagnetic Pulse attack on the United States.

Those of us who study the history of societal collapse, who might also be known as doomers, as well as preppers, tend to define a potential collapse as either a slow crash , or a fast crash .

A slow crash would be something akin to the slow collapse of a major power / civilization, like the Romans, or the Mayans, or, for that matter& us, with the current economic collapse, triggered by the global peak in oil production, which occurred in June, 2008 (and longer, if you look at the trigger events, and the peaking of various indicators since the 1970s).

A fast crash, on the other hand, would be something sudden, like a nuclear attack, natural disaster, or a comet hitting the Earth -- or drastic oil-supply loss triggering socioeconomic collapse.

The new, apocalyptic novel One Second After deals with an extremely fast crash, being that of an EMP, or Electromagnetic Pulse attack on the United States.

I felt that a long intro to this book review was necessary, since many, to include peak oilers and other progressive visionaries may not be familiar with what EMP is. Also, this particular book deserves it, as it is very realistically written, unlike S.M. Sterling s Dies the Fire. Dies the Fire and its sequels were very popular novels, but read more like a Society of Creative Anachronisms fantasy, where even firearms fail to function. That particular book is well-known among the progressive community in the Pacific Northwest, where it takes place, mostly in Oregon.

To explain briefly what EMP is, it is radio wave-like energy that is emitted from a nuclear detonation. As a direct hit on a physical target, nuclear detonations only produce a limited amount of EMP. However, a nuclear device, detonated, high in the atmosphere (or above), can produce an electrical chain-reaction, affecting everything below it, line-of-sight. This energy is usually expressed in, and measured in the tens, to hundreds of thousands of volts.

Electromagnetic Pulse can effect entire power grids, as well as anything solid-state (semiconductors, transistors, integrated circuits, etc.), particularly if it has an antenna connected. Regardless of this, the EMP wave will generally hit any and all circuitry at the same time, unless it is specifically shielded against it. Therefore, protective items like surge protectors, fuses, etc. don t work.

The author, William R. Forstchen, who holds a Ph.D. from Perdue University, specializes in military history and the history of technology. He is known for his non-fiction works, such as Gettysburg, and Pearl Harbor. Forstchen is also known for his fantasy novels and other works of fiction, set to actual history within the Civil War.

This book is forwarded by Newt Gingrich, and although some politically-oriented people might moan and groan at the thought of a former Republican Speaker of the House providing a forward to a work of fiction, he simply endorses the purpose of the book as a warning. Not from a Fatherland Security (oh&I meant Homeland Security) the terrorists are everywhere and we should be constantly vigilant standpoint, but from the fact that very few people in government have taken this particular type of foreign threat seriously.

Forstchen admits in his Acknowledgements that All books are, in a way, the works of others& Although he mentions the novel Alas, Babylon and the movies Testament and On the Beach, I found that the storyline more closely resembles Lucifer s Hammer, the famous apocalyptic novel that helped spark the survivalist movement during the 1970 s. Lucifer s Hammer was also about an extremely fast crash, brought on by a comet s impact with the Earth, which effectively destroys human civilization.

I actually found it puzzling why both the author of this book and his friend, Newt Gingrich mentioned the movie Testament. Having just recently watched this movie in it s 25-year anniversary DVD format for the first time since the early 1980 s, Testament was more of an emotionally charged, less detail-oriented story of the effects of a strategic nuclear strike, on the people of a small town, outside of any burst radius. It was obviously a more liberal-oriented movie that preached the No Nukes message. This is confirmed by the fact that in the more recent DVD release of the film, the extra material includes interviews with the survivors of Hiroshima, little kids being taught about nukes, etc. Nonetheless, I can see how Testament could provide some seed material for this novel.

The book makes very intelligent observations, regarding how a fast crash would manifest itself, most notably the fact that yes; we will be thrown into something resembling the 1800 s. Only problem is, we don t have an 1800s-type infrastructure. Even worse, even if we did, it wouldn t be able to support the current population, and population densities within the US. The result is an instant Dark Age, where feudal-type arrangements are made with other nearby communities, as waves of starvation and disease dominate this story.

This novel takes place in North Carolina, in an area of the country where population density is already extremely high; the East Coast. Needless to say, the human carrying capacity of this region is practically nil in the event of a grid-down collapse, largely due to the replacement of local farms with suburban development, the kind of pressboard and vinyl encroachment that would throw James Howard Kunstler into a fit. The author does a good job in conveying this fact.

The main character is John Matherson, a retired US Army full-bird colonel, and history professor. This character is largely based on the author himself, in addition to taking place where the author lives.

The human die-off in this story occurs in waves. The first to go are all of the nursing home residents, as they lose their medications (particularly the ones that require refrigeration), dietary needs, etc. Next are all the people on various other medications, people suffering from their own obesity and lives of over-consumption, etc. The author also does a good job conveying how pampered and spoiled a society we ve been, with medications for everything: Keeping people alive in a state that was never originally intended for human beings, such as drug-coated stints, and other heart medications, in particular. One reference is made to a 41-year old, who dies from a heart attack, simply carrying a bucket of water to his house. He is described as 50-pounds overweight, with cholesterol of 280 , and was known to live off of fast food.

On a subject dear to my heart, a short reference was made to us survivalists. Initially, the city council depicted in this novel wanted to confront a certain clan, living up in the hills . They are introduced, among others as &the old survivalist types, the kind that were real disappointed when the world didn t go to hell with Y2K. They re just waiting for us to come up and try. (p. 159)

Initially, they discuss this clan s frozen meat, stored in a giant deep freeze, run off an old generator they were known to have. With the help of the main character, they decide that the amount of food taken enough for maybe one meal per several hundred, would not be worth the loss of life. He also helps them decide that they should not take anyone s food stores by force, provided they were not already participating in the town s collectivized food rationing system. The main character then mentions that if there are any survivalists, and know that the town is not a threat to them, that the town would want to work alongside them, and learn any skills the survivalists would have to teach them.

Cool.

As the food rationing gets smaller and smaller, the scenes are like Ethiopia in the early 1980 s, or Somalia in the 1990 s. As of Day 63:

The soup line at the elementary school was already forming up, even though distribution of the day s rations wasn t until noon. The carcass of a hog was trussed up to a tree, actually barely a suckling, already stripped down to the bones, which would be tossed into the pot as well.

The people on line were skeletal, their weight really falling away now. Many could barely shuffle along. Kids were beginning to have bloated stomachs. Out along the curb, half a dozen bodies lay, dragged out for the meat wagon, no longer even given the dignity of a sheet to cover them. A man, three kids, most likely their parents dead, and no one to truly care for them, and a woman, obviously a suicide, with her wrists slashed open. (p. 260)

The main character later admits to himself that his family could have had just

a 50-pound sack of flour on hand, and some other basic things stored. Indeed, virtually everyone in this town only seems to have a few days of food, with nothing put-up, or stored, when the EMP attack occurs.

As is usually the case in being a prepper, I was pulling my hair out, talking to the main character (a habit I have, as if watching a movie), as he and other people did seemingly stupid things, or did things wrong. This is actually a good thing within a post-apocalyptic novel, as it represents a well thought-out story, on the part of the author.

One of the people referenced in the afterword to this novel is the peak oil hero himself, Republican House Representative Roscoe Bartlett. Bartlett, himself a former research scientist, had written a letter to the White House, describing how an EMP hit &could cause the permanent collapse of our society. This letter accompanied the Report of the Commission to Assess the Threat to the United States From Electromagnetic Pulse, which was largely ignored, having been released the very same day as the 9/11 Commission Report in 2004.

Again, One Second After represents an incredibly fast crash, as the modern convenience of electricity is suddenly and irreparably removed. It is also meant as a warning. And folks, it is UG-LY. There is no fantasy involved here, as the book goes into detail describing what the actual effects of an instant, without warning, EMP attack would be.

Without giving away any more of the book, I highly recommend One Second After, as it was extremely hard to put down, similar to my experience with Lucifer s Hammer.

And it does indeed give a very real warning. In this age of a crumbling US Empire, accompanied by a global financial collapse (not cyclical crisis, as the media would like for you to think), the US is already experiencing the type of blowback described by Chalmers Johnson. This is in addition to the US now being in direct competition with other major powers over the Earths remaining resources. Therefore, a massive nuclear EMP attack is a very real threat. After I finished it, I found myself stuffing any and all electronics into ammunition cans that were then connected to the grounding circuit in my house.

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Other articles by Jerry Erwin:

World Made by Hand and post-apocalyptic fiction: a prepper’s perspective

Survivalism: for Peak Oilers and Ecotopians Too?

For further reading / viewing:

Forstchen, William R. One Second After. Forge Books. 2009.

Niven, Larry & Jerry Pournelle. Lucifer’s Hammer. Playboy Press. 1977.

Rawles, James Wesley, Patriots: A Novel of Survival in the Coming Collapse. Expanded / Updated Edition. Ulysses Press. 1990-2009.

Alas, Babylon

Testament

On the Beach