

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Newt Gingrich and the EMP Threat

December 13, 2011

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The front page of yesterday's *New York Times* features a story [3] on Newt Gingrich's "doomsday vision:" an attack over the United States' airspace known as an electromagnetic pulse, or EMP. Gingrich and a cadre of concerned national security analysts worry that terrorists or rogue states—Iran and North Korea—could detonate a nuclear device over the United States that theoretically could disrupt electrical circuits, from cars to power grids.

The *Times* does a commendable job of questioning Gingrich's arguments and whether this is a legitimate national security concern. Despite the fact that a "National EMP Recognition Day" [4] exists, the threat is in fact very, very low. But it may be unfortunate that such extravagant doomsday scenarios get placed on the front page of the *Times*.

I addressed the EMP threat in my 2010 book *Atomic Obsession* [5] and I included a discussion of the views of Stephen Younger, the former head of nuclear weapons research at Los Alamos National Lab, as forcefully put forward in his 2007 book, *Endangered Species* [6]:

Younger is appalled at the way "one fast-talking scientist" managed in 2004 to convince some members of Congress that North Korea might be able to launch a nuclear device capable of emitting a high-altitude electromagnetic pulse that could burn out computers and other equipment over a wide area. When he queried a man he considers to be "perhaps the most knowledgeable person in the world about such designs" (and who "was never asked to testify"), the response was: "I don't think the *United States* could do that sort of thing today. To say that the North Koreans could do it, and without doing any testing, is simply ridiculous." Nevertheless, concludes Younger acidly, "rumors are passed from one person to another, growing at every repetition, backed by flimsy or nonexistent intelligence and the reputations of those who are better at talking than doing." [emphasis in the original]

The 2012 presidential election should certainly contain a legitimate discussion of national security issues. But I don't think it really needs to include a lot of breast-beating about the EMP "threat."