

When lights and all go dark

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Military, elected officials and local first responders were among the attendees of the Center for Strategic Leadership's workshop, "In the Dark: Military planning for a catastrophic critical infrastructure event" Sept. 28-30. Photo by Megan Clugh.

Sept. 30, 2010— What would happen if the nation were to experience an electromagnetic pulse, darkening our critical infrastructure and paralyzing millions of Americans in their daily lives? What would the response efforts look like and who would be involved? These are questions that were addressed during the Center for Strategic Leadership's workshop, "In the Dark: Military planning for a catastrophic critical infrastructure event."

The workshop, conducted at the Collins Center on Carlisle Barracks September 28-30, featured discussions on what actions are specified in doctrine, and what's needed for the Defense Department's ability to protect the nation's critical infrastructure. Speakers, including Dr. Peter Vincent Pry of Empact America, set the scene and addressed areas of concern. Workshop participants explored pre-event, response, and post-event planning, and consider assigned missions and appropriate venues for military-community interaction.

"Our biggest challenge is not technological, but administrative," Pry told workshop participants. "Not only should school children learn about EMP, but everyone needs to learn about EMP and industry needs to be a part of the solution."

"The devastation that would result from a catastrophic infrastructure event – whether caused by a high-altitude nuclear weapon, a major geomagnetic storm, or cyber attacks – is increasingly being discussed in a variety of Department of Defense, Department of Energy, and Department of Homeland Security organizations as well as in Congress," stated an information paper about the event.

Professor Cindy Ayers, a National Security Agency visiting professor, teaches Intelligence and Counter Terrorism at the Center for Strategic Leadership, is one of the event coordinators.

“Our entire critical infrastructure could be taken down with a single high altitude nuclear bomb and it could be like living in the 1600s without any of the modern inventions. The government needs to address this potential risk and be prepared to deal with such an event,” she said.

“We could also be in the dark as a result of a cyber attack or a solar storm, something that is very rare, but not out of the realm of possibility” said Ayers.

“The workshop hopes to accomplish a few things. This is to start the thought process, address the ‘what if?’ said Wendy LeBlanc, an event coordinator. “I don’t think a lot of military organizations are looking at this issue. It doesn’t have to be a terrorist attack; look at the impact of Hurricane Katrina.”

This workshop is focused on DOD’s role and how to coordinate the government’s response in the event of a major catastrophe, she said

LeBlanc said representatives of organizations ranging from the Department of Homeland Security to NORTHCOM to Carlisle Borough and everywhere in between were present to exchange thoughts and share planning issues with participants from major businesses, including Hershey and Giant.

“Industry participants have been invited so we can have a full view of what kind of coordination is needed,” said LeBlanc. “A report will be published later this fall with strategic recommendations and insight into these kinds of incidents as a result of the workshop.