

William R. Forstchen

One Second After



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“Civilization slides into the abyss of a new dark age in this horrifying apocalyptic novel. Forstchen has put Bin Laden’s wet dream on paper and, in the process, taken civilization straight to the rack.”

—STEPHEN COONTS, AUTHOR OF *THE ASSASSIN*

“Fans of such classics as *Alas, Babylon*, and *On the Beach* will have a good time as Forstchen tackles the obvious and some not-so-obvious questions the apocalypse tends to raise.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

WILLIAM R. FORSTCHEN, PhD is a professor of history at Montreat College. He received his doctorate from Purdue University with specializations in Military History and the History of Technology. He is the author of over forty books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Gettysburg* and *Pearl Harbor* (coauthored with Newt Gingrich). He resides near Asheville, North Carolina with his teenage daughter Meghan and their small pack of golden retrievers and yellow labs.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Overnight America’s trains, planes, cars, trucks, phones, computers, power plants, electronics and electrical equipment come to a screeching stop. Looting, food riots, insurrection and disease engulf the nation while a small town in the American South struggles to survive amid the sweeping chaos.

One Second After is a truly realistic look at the awesome power of a solar storm or a weapon to destroy the entire United States—literally within one second—a weapon that the *Wall Street Journal* warns could shatter America.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *One Second After* depicts the near-destruction of the United States, with the deaths of some two hundred million of its citizens, as a result of a type of disaster that most Americans never think about—not an earthquake, a terrorist’s bomb, or a nuclear strike on land. Had you heard of EMP before you read Forstchen’s book? How realistic does the danger seem to you? What nations or groups do you think could have planned and executed the attacks that Forstchen portrays?
2. Most of us take for granted how utterly reliant we are on electrical power, especially the more technologically advanced our societies are. In a situation like that with which *One Second After* begins—all power shutting down, car and truck engines dying suddenly, generators failing to kick in, phones useless, a broad and ominous silence falling—what would be your first instinct? Where would you want to go? Whom would you first want to contact, or protect? How prepared would you, your family, or your home be for such a scenario?
3. One of the first moments at which the book’s main character, John Matherson, is surprised by his own behavior is on Day One, when he refuses to give rides in his mother-in-law’s car to a group of people, including Makala Turner, who are stranded on the highway. Why does John violate his own usual standards of behavior? What sudden shift takes place in him, and what does it foreshadow for the rest of the story? Would you have made the same decision, in those circumstances?

4. Guns appear very early in *One Second After*; John reaches for his only a few hours after the power first goes off. Were you surprised by the omnipresence of guns in the story, or how frequently they were key to its plot? How would John, his family, and the people of Black Mountain have fared had they had less access to guns? Would Forstchen's story have unfolded any differently if it had been set in a part of country in which few everyday citizens own weapons?

5. *One Second After* focuses on how human behavior changes in the aftermath of a catastrophe. What does the behavior of various characters in Forstchen's story say about human nature, stripped of the trappings and supports of modern-day civilization? Who in the book is most likely to lose control as the situation becomes increasingly grim? Which characters manage to hold onto their own moral code as things disintegrate around them, and how do they do it?

6. Several of the book's characters agonize over the idea that while "we were all Americans" before the EMP, in its aftermath people have abandoned all sense of national unity and turned on one another in their desperation to survive. At a local level, the people of Black Mountain quickly confront the question of who among them should be considered "outsiders" and denied food or medical care. What different levels of community, or belonging, do you see in Forstchen's story? Who do John and other characters prioritize and align themselves with—their families, their friends and neighbors, their town, their state, or their country—and how do those priorities change as the story unfolds? Whose priorities do you identify with most?

7. At a meeting of the town's leaders after the EMP has hit, John insists that they begin by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. What rituals do various characters cling to in the course of the book? How much, and in what ways, do those rituals help each of them to go forward in the face of disaster? In a catastrophe like the one Forstchen envisions, what rituals do you think you would try to preserve?

8. Black Mountain and Swannanoa run into conflicts with the nearest city, Asheville, over the question of accepting refugees, and Forstchen often mentions the belief among city-dwellers that there is an endless supply of food to be found in a rural, mountainous area like Black Mountain. How often do conflicts between urban and rural areas arise in the course of the book? How do you think Black Mountain/Swannanoa's decisions and actions are influenced by their being rural communities? Are the ethics and values of rural towns and cities different, especially in a crisis?

9. In *One Second After*, John decides to lie to various characters at various times. What are his motivations for lying, and when does he do it? Is he right to do it, and would you have done differently in his situation? How do the town's leaders balance the responsibility of keeping the peace with their obligation to tell the public the whole truth? What "strategic" lies do they employ, and do those lies ultimately help or hurt?

10. Execution becomes an all-too-common theme in the book. How do you feel about the many executions that take place—from John's first public execution of the two men in the park for having stolen drugs from the nursing home, to the Posse's brutal executions of prisoners for food, to the mandatory execution of

almost all wounded Posse members at the end of Black Mountain's final battle? Why does John spare the lives of the Posse's eight remaining members? Do you agree with his decision and the reasoning behind it?

11. John is frequently torn between his obligation to serve and protect the public and his anguish over his daughter Jennifer's deteriorating health and need for fresh insulin. How far is he willing to go to obtain medication and care for her when others are dying for lack of it? How far would you go were you in his shoes? Is it possible to prioritize the health of your town or community as a whole over the life of a member of your own family?

12. At the story's end, General Wright commends John and the populations of Black Mountain and Swannanoa for having stayed put and banded together in the aftermath of the EMP. Do you think that the residents of the two towns did the right thing by staying where they were and depending upon their own labor, ingenuity, and determination for their survival? Could they have evacuated to a larger city like Asheville, and what would have been the pros and cons of doing so? Do you think that more or fewer of them would have survived had they decided to relocate in search of more help and resources?

13. At the book's end, John wonders if General Wright sees "Americans" in the skeletal survivors of Black Mountain. Are Americans still Americans without our prosperity, our wealth, our technology and infrastructure, our immense strength? What qualities do you think make someone an American? Do those qualities survive the devastation in *One Second After*? Is there still a viable America left at the story's end?

PRAISE FOR ONE SECOND AFTER

"The only thing more terrifying than this masterfully crafted story is the possibility of it actually happening—and not a damn thing is being done to protect us."

—W. E. B. GRIFFIN AND WILLIAM E. BUTTERWORTH IV

"A blood-chilling wake-up call that chaos and death are but a power plug away.... Stock up on food, water, medicine, and batteries now. This horror could happen tomorrow."

—WILLIAM B. SCOTT, FORMER EDITOR AND BUREAU CHIEF OF AVIATION WEEK & SPACE TECHNOLOGY AND COAUTHOR OF SPACE WARS

"Wonderful, very skillful, very insightful."

—LARRY NIVEN, NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING COAUTHOR OF LUCIFER'S HAMMER

"Good storytelling consists very simply of creating characters so believable that the reader forms a deep bond. Forstchen did such a damned fine job with *One Second After* that shortly after the first page, I had been reeled in hook, line, and sinker."

—DAVID HAGBERG, USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF DANCE WITH THE DRAGON

"Forstchen's work has flair and power."

—JOEL ROSENBERG, AUTHOR OF THE SLEEPING DRAGON

"One of the most intriguing writers today in the field of historical and military science fiction."

—HARRY TURTLEDOVE, AUTHOR OF GUNS OF THE SOUTH