



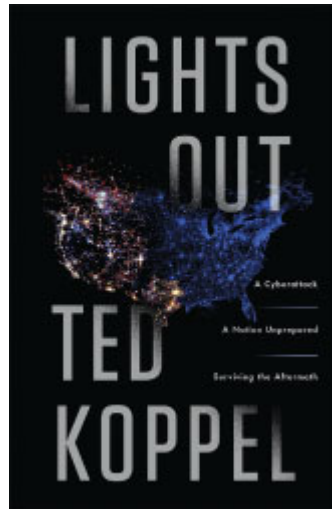
Written by [James Heiser](#) on April 4, 2016

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Dark America

Lights Out — A Cyberattack, A Nation Unprepared, Surviving the Aftermath, by Ted Koppel, New York: Crown Publishers, 2015, 279 pages, hardcover.

For the generation that can remember the days of the Iran hostage crisis from November 1979 through January 1981, the face of Ted Koppel is a familiar one. For 25 years, Koppel was the anchor for the late-night ABC News program *Nightline*, and the half-hour broadcast that began as a nightly update on the hostage crisis became a forum for in-depth discussion of a wide range of issues.



Although Koppel remains one of the most readily identifiable television journalists, he had rarely ventured into the realm of print journalism. In *Lights Out*, Koppel sets forth a scenario in which the American Republic is functionally held hostage.

He examines the possibility of a terrorist attack that would imperil the nation's electric grid. While apocalyptic scenarios centering on the purported dangers of an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) attack have received a great deal of attention in recent years, what Koppel describes in *Lights Out* is less esoteric, examining the possible effects of cyberattacks and physical attacks on the nation's energy infrastructure:

Electricity is what keeps our society tethered to modern times. There are three power grids that generate and distribute electricity throughout the United States, and taking down all or any part of a grid would scatter millions of Americans in a desperate search for light, while those unable to travel would tumble back into something approximating the mid-nineteenth century. The very structure that keeps electricity flowing throughout the United States depends absolutely on computerized systems designed to maintain perfect balance between supply and demand. Maintaining that balance is not an accounting measure; it is an operational imperative. The point needs to be restated: for the grid to remain fully operational, the supply and demand of electricity have to be kept in perfect balance.

Experts can, and do, agree with regard to the vulnerability of the power grid, and Koppel gives opportunity for opposing parties to make their case regarding the risks posed by a variety of possible attacks on the system. Nevertheless, reading *Lights Out*, it is clear that Koppel is convinced of the reality of the danger, and the three major portions of the book set forth what the author perceives to be the threat, and possible responses to that threat.

The first portion of *Lights Out* — “A Cyberattack” — provides a detailed assessment of the possible risks posed to the electrical grid, and the response of both power industry analysts and government officials to such an assessment. Koppel presents arguments that are made on, and off, the record by experts within the industry regarding the purported vulnerabilities.



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In the second part of the book — “A Nation Unprepared” — Koppel notes that the federal government has apparently learned nothing helpful about disaster preparedness from debacles such as that which resulted from the handling of Hurricane Katrina:

If not the Red Cross, FEMA, or the Department of Homeland Security, where should the interested citizen turn? What is available online can be pathetically inadequate, boiling down to the customary recommendation for two to three days’ worth of food and water, warm clothing, a functioning battery-powered radio, and extra batteries. Disaster preparation recommendations usually include a predetermined plan for where and how the family will meet. Beyond that, citizens are largely adrift, left to find their own solutions.

Throughout the chapters of this portion of the book, readers are presented with an all-too-familiar view of the federal bureaucracy, with the individuals who should be the most knowledgeable regarding the implications of a “grid down” scenario often clueless when it comes to such basic questions as: How will power be restored? How will citizens be fed and sheltered when the usual means of resupply may not be functioning? How will the government coordinate relief efforts? Thus, when Jeh Johnson, the secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, was asked by Koppel what would happen in the event of any situation where the power was off for more than “two or three days,” the secretary was reduced to a mantra-like repetition of the need for a battery-powered radio. In Koppel’s words, “It was clear that we had been engaging in a dialogue of the deaf.”

The third portion of *Lights Out* — “Surviving the Aftermath” — is primarily focused on the efforts of individuals to prepare for a wide variety of national disasters, including scenarios such as those presented in *Lights Out*. In certain regards, this third portion may be the most interesting section, since it is arguably one of the most sympathetic treatments of “preppers” to be afforded by a “mainstream” journalist. Koppel documents the efforts of individual citizens to prepare for taking care of themselves in the event of a natural *or* man-made disaster. Contrary to the usual media stereotypes, Koppel’s “preppers” are not “anti-government” radicals, “gun nuts,” racists, or neo-Nazis; they are businessmen, directors of non-profit organizations, ranchers, farmers, and other responsible citizens. One entity that receives a particularly sympathetic treatment is the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which Koppel praises at length for its extensive network of charitable support of co-religionists, and preparation for a wide variety of disasters. In Koppel’s words, “The LDS church has established a model that makes good common sense, one that serves to support families in times of illness or unemployment, natural disaster or international crisis.”

However, while Koppel’s treatment of efforts by citizens to prepare to provide for their own needs in an emergency is commendable, the same cannot be said for his statist mentality when it comes to preventing such a disaster in the first place. In fact, it is hard to reconcile different portions of *Lights Out* with one another: How can Koppel recognize the ineptitude of federal officials to address the need to prepare for a variety of long-term disasters with his advocacy of the expansion of unconstitutional powers being given to those same entities? In short, if the federal government cannot handle the logistics of providing disaster relief in an emergency, why on Earth should they be allowed to grind the Bill of Rights under foot? Koppel maintains that preventing a cyberattack requires further governmental intrusion into the rights of citizens:

For any sort of cyber defense system to efficiently protect the electric power industry, information sharing has to be a two-way street. Corporations will have to get over their privacy and liability



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concerns and give government agencies the security data those agencies say they need in order to be effective. The military and intelligence agencies, in turn, need to make information relating to cyber threats available in real time, setting aside worries about jeopardizing sources and methods.

And Koppel found an eagerness within the intelligence community to further invade the civil liberties of the public:

Military and intelligence experts with whom I've spoken are unanimous in asserting U.S. superiority in launching cyberattacks. There is similar agreement that the nation's cyber defense capabilities are more modest. It's a function, many believe, of operating within the constraints of a democracy. Mike Hayden, former head of the NSA and director of central intelligence, described the handicap of being denied "home field advantage." He was referring specifically to the Fourth Amendment privileges that protect the privacy of U.S. citizens. There is no denying a certain wistfulness among senior American military and intelligence officials when they discuss the constraints of the Constitution.

What Koppel appears to fail to understand is that such "wistfulness" by unelected (and seemingly unaccountable) bureaucrats is a threat to the Republic that is far more pressing than any hypothetical attack on the nation's infrastructure, and the author's reference to "Fourth Amendment *privileges*" is chilling. The fundamental right enumerated in the Fourth Amendment is an "inalienable right" — not a *privilege*. The language of the Fourth Amendment makes clear the character of the inalienable right that apparently rankles "senior American military and intelligence officials":

The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the person or things to be seized.

Terrorists may threaten our lives and properties, but only our fellow Americans can threaten our liberties — and those liberties are a treasure that must be protected at any cost. One may appreciate Koppel's efforts to document the potential threat posed by a cyberattack; but what is unacceptable is the government-sponsored "cyberattack" on the Bill of Rights that he advocates as a means to prevent such terrorism. In this regard, the author of *Lights Out* could have profited from asking more of the "preppers" he interviewed in writing this book what *they* thought of his notion of further undermining the Fourth Amendment. But then, the interviews might not have been printable.



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