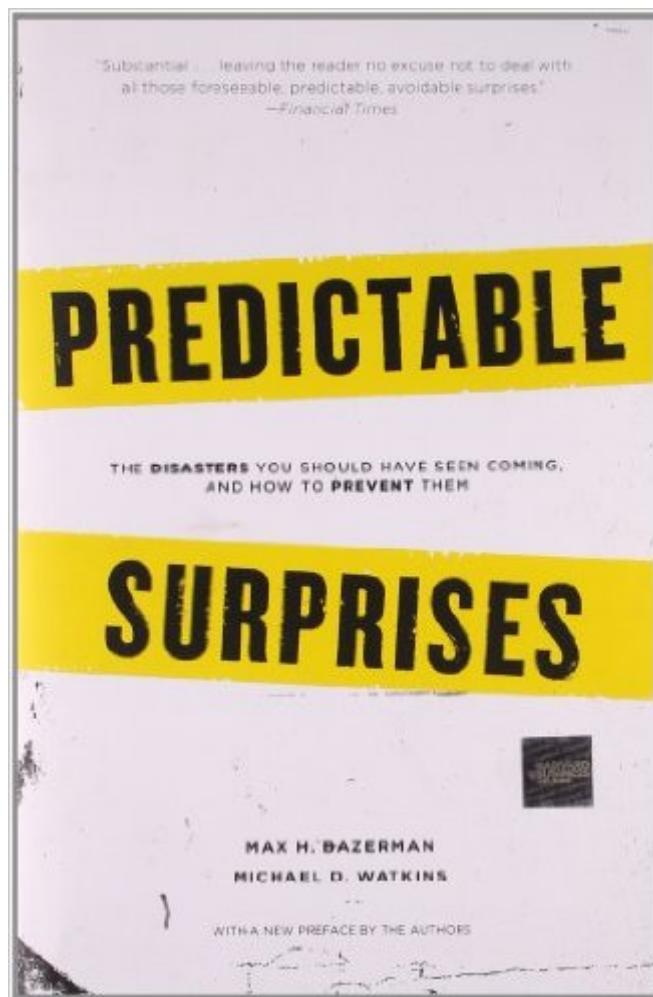


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# Predictable Surprises: The Disasters You Should Have Seen Coming, And How To Prevent Them (Center For Public Leadership)



## **Synopsis**

Most events that catch us by surprise are both predictable and preventable, but we consistently miss the warning signs. This book shows why such predictable surprises place us all at risk and shows how we can understand, anticipate, and prevent them before disaster strikes.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

The authors have found a memorable phrase to describe a depressingly common phenomenon - the occurrence of a disaster or failure that has been widely and often publicly predicted. The term 'predictable surprise' will undoubtedly enter the managerial and political language. They have provided a valuable analysis of why these predictable disasters occur and what can be done to prevent them (while recognizing that there are also such things as 'unpredictable surprises' which can not be avoided through these processes). The book is invaluable for the clear way in which it brings the elements together and for the vividness and immediacy of the examples chosen to illustrate the points. The result is a book that is very readable as well as being immediately useful, even if many of the points have also been made elsewhere by other authors. The book provides a template against which organizations can assess their defences against 'predictable surprises', and I suspect that every organization will find gaps in its armour when it measures itself against the recommendations in the book. The authors also use the book to mount a stinging attack on the failures of the American political system (and by extension those of other countries) and the need for fundamental reform. Their attack on the activities of the special interest groups and their direct

responsibility for some of the worst disasters that the US has suffered is particularly pointed. One can only hope that the criticisms will be listened to and acted upon, and that politicians as well as business people will read and note them.

A major shortcoming of Bazerman and Watkins' book is the failure to provide adequate evidence to support their arguments about what they call "predictable surprises", which they define as "an event or series of events that take an individual or group by surprise, despite prior awareness of all of the information necessary to anticipate the events and their consequences." Bazerman and Watkins build their case substantially on just two examples: aviation security failures leading to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and auditor independence concerns leading to the collapse of Enron and Arthur Anderson. Several other examples are discussed in less depth throughout the text, however many of these are not actually predictable surprises under the definition provided. For example, global warming is discussed a number of times; however global warming has been in public discussion since the 1930s, and today a substantial majority of people believe not only the concept of global warming but that current warming is man-made. By 2050, this subject will have been under study for 120 years and popular consensus will have been achieved for 50-60 years. This is certainly predictable, but hardly a surprise. The United States' looming crisis in entitlement spending also falls in this category. Flaws exist in other anecdotal support as well. For example, Bazerman and Watkins cite aviation security failures as an occasion when overly discounting the future lead to a predictable surprise. Quick calculation based on figures provided in the book show that, using equal discount rates for the expected future cost of security and the future cost of disaster, even with a disaster probability as high as 10% for any given year, the airlines would be ahead on a cost basis.

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