



Worst-Case Scenarios

By Cass R. Sunstein

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Host: Chris Gondek | Producer: Heron & Crane
Nuclear bombs in suitcases, anthrax bacilli in ventilators, tsunamis and meteors, avian flu, scorchingly hot temperatures: nightmares that were once the plot of Hollywood movies are now frighteningly real possibilities. How can we steer a path between willful inaction and reckless overreaction?

Cass Sunstein explores these and other worst-case scenarios and how we might best prevent them in this vivid, illuminating, and highly original analysis. Singling out the problems of terrorism and climate change, Sunstein explores our susceptibility to two opposite and unhelpful reactions: panic and utter neglect. He shows how private individuals and public officials might best respond to low-probability risks of disaster--emphasizing the need to know what we will lose from precautions as well as from inaction. Finally, he offers an understanding of the uses and limits of cost-benefit analysis, especially when current generations are imposing risks on future generations.

Throughout, Sunstein uses climate change as a defining case, because it dramatically illustrates the underlying principles. But he also discusses terrorism, depletion of the ozone layer, genetic modification of food, hurricanes, and worst-case scenarios faced in our ordinary lives. Sunstein concludes that if we can avoid the twin dangers of over-reaction and apathy, we will be able to ameliorate if not avoid future catastrophes, retaining our sanity as well as scarce resources that can be devoted to more constructive ends.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Sunstein, a University of Chicago law professor, often writes about government regulation. Here he focuses specifically on cost-benefit analysis (CBA) of actions that governments (as well as the private sector and individuals) can take to ward off potential crises. CBA has been used, most famously by George W. Bush's administration, to guide national policy; Bush critics believe the numbers are often fudged to get the results the White House wants. Oddly, Sunstein fails to investigate the science and politics of the Bush administration's chief cost-benefit guru, John D. Graham, but he does explore the uses and potential misuses of CBA, often in sufficient detail to challenge readers not well grounded in economics and statistics. Global warming serves as the narrative thread throughout the book, but Sunstein also looks at appropriate reactions to terrorist threats, genetic modification of food, hurricanes and avian flu, among other issues. Within the complex explanations, Sunstein does a reasonable job of achieving his three goals: to understand individual responses to worst-case scenarios (usually to plan far too much [or] far too little); to suggest more sensible public policy regarding low-probability risks of disaster; and to dispassionately evaluate CBA as a tool, especially as it pertains to policy making in the future (Nov.)

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Review

Worst-Case Scenarios is a powerful intellectual treatment about the most difficult problems facing society. The book makes it clear that these problems do not have easy answers. Sunstein's analysis also makes it clear that we would be better off if societal decision makers fully understood the insights he brings to these problems. (Max Bazerman, Harvard Business School)

Sunstein cuts through a great deal of confusion that is preventing the development of coherent and rational public policies. The issues raised by low-probability, high-consequence events are becoming more important as the world is more interconnected. Governments and citizens are not prepared to deal with these issues. This book will help. (Jonathan Baron, University of Pennsylvania)

Professor Sunstein provides cogent advice about how people should respond to low probabilities of catastrophe. He strikes a thoughtful middle ground, showing how we should be careful without being paranoid. While the applications to terrorism and climate change are insightful, his intellectual approach offers guidance for all sorts of possible catastrophes. The book is a must for leaders of business and government throughout the world. (John Graham, Dean, Pardee RAND Graduate School)

Worst-Case Scenarios is a rich analysis, both explanatory and normative, of societal responses to catastrophic risks such as terrorism and global warming. Sunstein occupies the fertile middle ground between the proponents of traditional rational-actor models and cost-benefit analysis, and those who reject these approaches entirely. (Matthew D. Adler, University of Pennsylvania Law School)

Worst-Case Scenarios is an important and timely book. (Glenn C. Altschuler *Baltimore Sun* 2007-12-30)

Sunstein's book is best when he discusses how we weigh up the costs of protecting ourselves against the benefits of doing so. Many object to cost-benefit analysis, regarding it as cold and mechanical, particularly the placing of monetary value on human lives. Sunstein accepts it is a rough instrument, but he argues that many of us implicitly use it. (Michael Skapinker *Financial Times* 2008-02-02)

Sunstein writes engagingly, though in a way that scolds us a little for our irrational foibles; and he can illuminate very complex areas of rational choice theory--controversies about future discounting, for example (most of us prefer the certainty of \$10,000 now to the certainty of a larger sum ten years hence, even adjusted for inflation), and commensurability (the assessment of such diverse consequences as monetary loss, moral loss and the loss of a zoological species in some common currency of analysis)--so that intelligent thought about decision-making in conditions of uncertainty is brought within reach of the sort of non-specialist reader who is likely to have a practical or political interest in these matters...Sunstein illuminates a whole array of difficult and technical issues: the logic of irreversibility, the basis of low-level probabilistic calculations, the "social amplification" of large single-event losses, different ways of taking into account effects on future generations and ways of thinking about the monetisation of disparate costs and benefits. (Jeremy Waldron *London Review of Books* 2008-04-10)

From the Inside Flap

Nuclear bombs in suitcases, anthrax bacilli in ventilators, tsunamis, meteors hitting the earth: nightmares that were once the subjects of Hollywood movies are now frighteningly real possibilities. But how real are they--how should we assess their risks, and, if need be, take costly and risky measures to avoid them? How can we steer a path between being paralyzed by fear and overreacting recklessly? Cass Sunstein assesses these scenarios and what legal and policy measures might be taken to counter them in this calm, carefully reasoned, and sensible primer. He first explores people's responses to worst-case scenarios and their susceptibility to two opposite behaviors: overreaction and neglect. These behaviors affect persons and governments alike. He then examines how private individuals and public officials might best respond to low-probability risks of disaster. Finally, he offers an understanding of the role of cost-benefit analysis, especially when we are facing harms that will not come to fruition in the near future. Throughout he uses climate change as a defining case, because of its significance and because it clearly illustrates underlying principles. But he also discusses terrorism, depletion of the ozone layer, genetic modification of food, hurricanes, and the avian flu. At the end, Sunstein concludes, we can drive ourselves crazy obsessing about these scenarios. On the other hand, if we spend some time thinking about them, keeping in mind a few simple principles and not acting precipitately, we can lead longer, safer, and happier lives. Cass R. Sunstein is Karl Llewellyn Professor of Law and Jurisprudence, The University of Chicago.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Martha Williams:

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