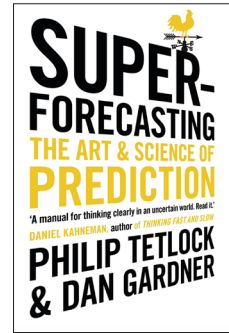


## Book Reviews

# Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction



By Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner

**Publisher:** Random House, 2015 (ISBN: 978-1847947147) 340 pages

Reviewed by Group Captain (Retd) Clive Blount

---

**Biography:** Group Captain (Retd) Clive Blount served as a navigator and recently concluded his career at the UK's Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre. He is also a CAS' Fellow with a Master of Philosophy in International Relations from the University of Cambridge.

---

### Introduction

Philip E. Tetlock is a Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as holding appointments in both political science and psychology departments and the Wharton School of Business, while Dan Gardner is a journalist. Tetlock's previous work looked at the reliability of forecast produced by so-called "experts"; in the 1990s he analyzed the predictions of around 300 respected political commentators and experts, and, to much publicity demonstrated that: "Human beings who spend their lives studying the state of the world ... are poorer forecasters than dart-throwing monkeys."

The premise of this book questions this simplistic summary and asks whether, even if it is the case that "experts" are to all intents and purposes guessing, is it the case that some monkeys are better at darts than others? *Superforecasting* suggests that some people, though not traditionally expert in any particular area, do appear to be able to foretell the outcome of events at a better rate than probability. Tetlock derives his conclusions from the multi-year study known as the Good Judgment Project, which saw thousands of subjects being asked to predict the outcome of a wide range of events. The subjects assigned a percentage likelihood of each prediction coming true, and were given the opportunity to revise their forecasts as new details emerged. At the end of the process, they were scored for the accuracy of their prediction when measured against the actual outcome. It transpired that a small group

amongst these non-experts not only significantly out-predicted their peers but, once parts of the project were incorporated into a wider IARPA competition, teams of professional researchers. Tetlock's analysis of these "superforecasters" concluded that "[i]t's not really who they are. It is what they do." And it is these actions that Tetlock attempts to detail in the remainder of the book.

However, if the reader is looking for a simple 'how to guide' on foretelling the future, then he is likely to be disappointed by *Superforecasting*. Written in the chatty style of a business 'self help' guide it spends a great deal of time on anecdotes and supporting tales and, although very entertaining, tends to detract from the meat of the central argument. Forays into business and strategic theory do not help, which is a great shame as what Tetlock and Gardner say are the fundamental skills of superforecasting are easily assimilable and have much applicability to any role involved with strategic planning. The authors surmise that superforecasters break complex problems into smaller, more tractable chunks, apply facts to these small problems wherever possible and only used estimation, intelligent estimation, to fill the gaps. Superforecasters will seek out comparators which might aid formulation of their views, and seek to take a balanced approach to particular pieces of evidence, rather than succumb to the temptation to over-react to them. The most important aspect of their approach is to reflect upon their past performance to avoid repeating previous mistakes or over-emphasizing successes.

In particular, the authors suggest that it is the way the superforecasters answer the question being asked that adds much to their efficacy. Often, the question as stated is loaded with emotion or supposition that introduces unconscious bias into the forecast; answering the opposite question, or subtly rephrasing the question, can negate this effect to give a more accurate forecast. The book also tackles forecasting as a team and discusses the most effective ways of using team members in support of a collective solution rather than allowing individual personalities and biases to skew the answer.

Although somewhat rambling, and containing much that is really not new, as a collective this book is an interesting and thought-provoking read. The skill of superforecasting clearly exists and can be learned and, although I do not suggest that we should all strive to become superforecasters, the skills of parsing, analysing, and predicting the outcome of future events, and effectively doing so as a team, would be of inestimable value to busy commanders and staff officers in an increasingly complex and chaotic world. This book is well worth the patience and time to read and absorb.

## **This article has been republished online with Open Access.**

Ministry of Defence © Crown Copyright 2023. The full printed text of this article is licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. To view this licence, visit <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/>. Where we have identified any third-party copyright information or otherwise reserved rights, you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned. For all other imagery and graphics in this article, or for any other enquires regarding this publication, please contact: Director of Defence Studies (RAF), Cormorant Building (Room 119), Shrivenham, Swindon, Wiltshire SN6 8LA.

 **ROYAL  
AIR FORCE**  
**Centre for Air and  
Space Power Studies**

**OGL**