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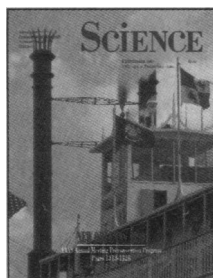
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COVER Riverboat, New Orleans, Louisiana. For details of the 1990 AAAS Annual Meeting, 15 to 20 February 1990, see pages 1313–1328. [Photograph by Michael Stuckey/Comstock]

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Interview with a Disaster Expert

Science. Dr. Noitall, you have been referred to as the supreme savant of the second-guessers, the prince of the post-dictors, the man with perfect hindsight.

Dr. Noitall. A vast understatement of my true abilities.

Science. What is your opinion of the recent earthquake in California?

Dr. Noitall. As I had pointed out repeatedly, there should have been no two-level highways, no houses built on filled land, and no connecting sections in bridges. It is scandalous that authorities allowed such conditions to persist.

Science. But many two-decker highways, houses on landfill, and connecting bridges survived with minor or no damage.

Dr. Noitall. Of course. The second-guessers who are at the top of the profession are distinguished by their ability to ignore irrelevant data and focus on the data that support their theories. Otherwise one can get hopelessly confused and fail to blame the guilty parties.

Science. What do you conclude from hurricane Hugo?

Dr. Noitall. A case of criminal negligence. Placing a city in the path of a hurricane has got to be the monumental goof of city planners. I have surveyed the region and there was plenty of space 30 miles north or 30 miles south to locate the city of Charleston. There is no question in my mind that the mayor, the railroad companies, and state officials are all guilty of malfeasance.

Science. Dr. Noitall, what about the bombing of the Pan American airliner?

Dr. Noitall. The one thing that is clear is that the terrorists are not to blame. They are simple journeymen and women who are going about their profession in a meticulous and careful way. It is the airlines, the West German government, the British government, and airport security personnel who bear responsibility for failure to alert passengers to the threat.

Science. But there are many bomb threats. How could they have known that this one was serious?

Dr. Noitall. It's so simple. This one occurred! That distinguishes it easily from all the false alarms. The important responsibility of an enlightened second-guesser is to identify the individuals who can be sued. There is no value in blaming impoverished groups with no money in the bank, or acts of God.

Science. Do you consider massive fluctuations in the stock market a disaster?

Dr. Noitall. Absolutely! In November 1987 only one month after the stock market crashed, I stated that it had to happen. The multiples were too great, the deficit too extraordinary, and the trade balance too out of proportion to maintain high stock prices.

Science. With stocks high again, do you expect another crash?

Dr. Noitall. Quite clearly I'd love to comment on that. However, the ethics of the National Association of Second-Guessers is that we are not allowed to make predictions. I would be thrown out of the association for unprofessional conduct endangering the reputation of all second-guessers.

Science. You mean under no circumstances would you make any prediction?

Dr. Noitall. If one predicts a 40% chance of rain, one can never be wrong. Our association is considering the possibility of allowing predictions when there is no chance of error. I can say with confidence there will be a 10% chance of an earthquake this year, a 15% chance of a hurricane, and a 12.5% chance of a stock market crash. Dr. Frank Lee Evasive, the man who invented this form of prediction, is about to be given our National Medal of Merit.

Science. Would you venture to make predictions in other circumstances.

Dr. Noitall. One device that we allow is what we call the self-canceling prediction. For example, this month I predicted unequivocally that the breaking of barriers in eastern Europe would force the Soviet Union to open its own borders and allow democracy in. Next week I am publishing a position paper that predicts that the wild changes in eastern Europe will force the Soviet Union to revert to repression in order to maintain its system. The documentation for each of these positions is superb, and in the future I will, of course, refer to whichever one turns out to be correct.

Science. Have you never made an unequivocal prediction?

Dr. Noitall. Only one. It is that the accuracy of second-guessers will only be exceeded by their numbers.—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.