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Comment: Experts who don't know they don't know

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Sadly, the conclusion reached by Green and Armstrong (2006) – that experts should not be used for predicting the decisions that people will make in conflicts – comes as no surprise. Decades ago, Armstrong himself taught us that expertise beyond a minimal level does not improve judgmental accuracy across a variety of domains (Armstrong, 1980). More recently, Tetlock (2006) drove home the point in a study of hundreds of political experts who made thousands of forecasts over many years. Like Green and Armstrong (2006), Tetlock (2006) found that that expert forecasts were frequently inaccurate. In a nod to Armstrong's previous work, Tetlock (2006) suggests that avid readers of the *New York Times* should be able to predict political events as well as highly trained experts.

Among other things, Green and Armstrong (2006) demonstrate that laymen mistakenly expect superior performance from expert forecasters relative to novice forecasters. Though it's true that neither novices nor experts performed much better than would a dart-throwing monkey in eight conflict prediction tasks, most study participants did not expect very much from the experts in the first place. Participants expected experts to be correct 45% of the time in tasks in which random guessing would yield a success rate of approximately 28%. Though these expectations were higher than chance, they are hardly a ringing endorsement for the perceived value of expert forecasters.

But if people really believe that experts are not all that good at divining the future, why do we clamor for their views? The possibilities are endless. Perhaps we find it comforting to be in the company of those who are knowledgeable about things that concern us. By speaking to

our concerns, experts may provide confirmation that our anxieties are well-founded. Or perhaps experts help us organize problems in our minds by laying out the advantages and disadvantages of the options that await. Or, when we ourselves must make decisions, perhaps experts function largely as convenient sources of blame for decisions that turn out badly (e.g., poor investment choices).

A question that may be more interesting than why we clamor for predictions from experts who disappoint is why experts continue to offer their faux expertise. At first blush, the answer seems obvious: experts predict because we ask them to and because they are well-rewarded for doing so. Fame, influence and riches are the spoils of those who answer the media's incessant calls for forecasting expertise. But I suspect that most experts *genuinely believe* in their forecasting skills. My suspicion may seem naïve in the face of consistent evidence that shows expert forecasters struggle to outperform novice forecasters and chance. Surely the experts know the data. They, more than anyone else, must know their own dismal records. Or do they? My hunch is that they do not think that they have bad forecasting records. Quite the contrary, they may believe that their records are outstanding.

Psychological research shows that people seek, recall, focus upon, and interpret evidence in ways that reinforce existing beliefs (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). These cognitive biases reinforce our initial beliefs and prevent us from having to admit error or concede intellectual ground. If conflict experts believe that they are quite good at forecasting the resolution of certain types of conflicts, they may sustain their faith in their forecasting skills by thinking about their correct calls, misremembering their failures or, perhaps, interpreting and encoding failures as successes. After all, world events are complicated and there is often plenty of wiggle room when it comes to deciding whether a political forecast (as opposed to, say, a weather forecast or a sports contest

forecast) is or is not correct. Were the experts and politicians who said that former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction immediately prior to the start of the 2003 U.S.–Iraq war correct? Most people think the experts and politicians were wrong. But others disagree. The holdouts note that Saddam Hussein did have those weapons at one time, that he used them against his own people, and that he had the desire and means to obtain such weapons again. Though this defense is an example of what some philosophers refer to as a “fallacy of diversion” (Damer, 1995) – i.e., an attempt to maneuver oneself into a more advantageous or less embarrassing intellectual position by focusing on peripheral matters – it may insulate forecasters from having to contemplate, let alone concede, error.

Even when experts do concede forecast error, they may not alter their beliefs about their forecasting skills because they may find ways to minimize the import of the errors that they commit. As Tetlock (2006) documents in his study of political forecasters, experts find ways to avoid conceding error even when a different outcome from the one they predicted occurs. Paraphrasing Tetlock’s detailed discussion, common defenses of failed predictions include (1) I was just off on timing – my predictions will eventually be borne out; (2) An improbable event occurred that changed the outcome; (3) My *reasoning* was accurate, and (4) My error was the lesser of the two errors that one could have made.

Green and Armstrong (2006) conclude on an optimistic note. They cite some of their other research which shows that conflict forecasting errors can be reduced when forecasters engage in role playing and draw upon analogies from previous conflicts. Until these and other decision aids are fully developed and find their way into the cultural mainstream, we would be wise to bear in mind the two types of forecasters identified by John Kenneth Galbraith: “Those who don’t know, and those who don't know they don't know.”

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