



## GUY: I have no predictions about the future

John Guy June 18, 2011



VIEWPOINT

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“What do you think?” George asks. My response: “I do not predict.” “That is OK,” says George. “Just tell me what you think. I will not hold you to it.” “Sorry,” I say. “You have my opinion.”

And George gives up, believing I have no valid opinion. But I do. My opinion is that I can comment on the present, and list future possibilities, dozens of them. However, I cannot predict the future, and I refuse to join the ranks of those who tried, such as:

- Albert Einstein and H.G. Wells, who both predicted the demise of humankind after World War II.
- Arnold Toynbee found a universal pattern in history, but only by ignoring or downgrading various civilizations. So, in 1962, he said: “[By 2002] the whole face of the planet will have been unified politically through the concentration of irresistible military power in some single set of hands.” His book was a best-seller, and his picture made the cover of *Time* magazine.
- Robert Heilbroner, who, in 1972, predicted either human extinction or a world government on Mao’s model.
- Paul Ehrlich, who forecasted an increasing death rate which, in 1974, was 13 per 1,000; the rate today is nine per 1,000.
- Plus all the people who predicted that Japan would dominate the world; that computers would lead to massive new amounts of leisure time; that the Social Security system would fail; that recessions, depressions and all sorts of imagined economic crises would destroy us by 1980; that Google and Amazon were fly-by-nights; that the Penn Central Transportation Co. could not fail; that Eli Lilly and Co. would sell at \$100 per share; and that Conesco Inc. and Anacomp Inc. would soar.

These and dozens of other failures of prediction are documented in “Future Babble, Why Expert Predictions are Next to Worthless,” a book by Dan Gardner. His conclusions, and his advice, are worthy:

“If you hear a [confident-sounding] person make a long-term prediction, it is almost certainly wrong.” Where do we get such predictions? “[From the] sort who doesn’t bother with complications, caveats and uncertainties. The sort who has one big idea ... the sort typically found in the media.”

Gardner concludes, “In Dante Alighieri’s vision of hell, fortunetellers and diviners are condemned to

spend eternity with their heads twisted backward, unable to see ahead, as they had tried to in life.”

You can see now why I refuse to predict, and why I disdain those who do, especially those who use prediction to support a political or ideological point of view. The national budget debate is filled with predictions, many seeing total economic disaster if the deficit/debt problem is not resolved immediately, others predicting that cutting national expenditures will increase jobs or prompt a second recession.

The education reform debate in Indiana also contains predictions, in all directions, such as that teachers will, or will not, thrive if the best are paid more, the worst fired and all publicly ranked, that charters and vouchers will improve general education results, that Indiana will sink to some unknown bottom if math and science scores do not match those of China. Which is right? I do not know.

My respect for a well-known Indiana economist, teacher and writer soared when I asked him when interest on the national debt would swamp our national budget. His answer: “I don’t know.”

Radio and television personalities, newspaper columnists, teachers and “futurists” who speak smoothly, confidently, with audience appeal and charisma, who propose a theory of economic and social waves or claim a reliable system to understand and/or to invest, are suspect, for they do not tell us their track records, but they do ask us to buy their books.

On the other hand, the physician, financial adviser, engineer or author who gives us possibilities, boring details and empathy for our personal situation is likely to be our best adviser, and a friend.

Why do we seek and pay for predictions? Why do prognosticators, decades later, affirm incorrect predictions? To whom do we listen? Dan Gardner answers these questions. •

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