

People's Almanac Predictions: Retrospective Check of Accuracy

The almanac's psychics aren't so perceptive

F. K. Donnelly

One of the most popular publications in recent years has been *The People's Almanac* series. These books make various best-seller lists and have sold millions of copies in their paperback editions. The successful formula employed by the editors is to present the reader with more than a thousand pages of entertaining and apparently accurate information. Subjects range from historical oddities to Hollywood scandals to sports records, to scientific data and geographical information about distant lands. Much of this information can be verified in other reference works. Yet in the introduction to the first *People's Almanac*, the editors declared their intention "to go beyond often repeated, unchallenged data and offer behind-the-scenes, frequently omitted *truths* [emphasis added]."¹ Let us examine this editorial objective with regard to the treatment of predictions by *The People's Almanac*.

The opening section of the first *People's Almanac*, published in 1975, offered readers some "Predictions by Present-Day Psychics."² Some of the past predictions of these psychics were set out according to whether they were right, wrong, or partly right. The clear impression given was that the psychics, while often wrong, were very often uncannily correct in their predictions of various political changes, natural disasters, scientific discoveries, and the like. Totaling the past records of 15 psychics as set out in this publication, we find that they were wrong 45 times, right 67 times, and partly right 7 times.

There are two problems in this arrangement of the past performances of psychics. First, we do not know the total number of predictions made by them and so we cannot be certain that the proportion of "right" scores has not been inflated by the elimination of vast numbers of "wrong" scores. Second, we cannot be sure that the so-called "right" predictions are not

F. K. Donnelly is an associate professor of history at the University of New Brunswick, St. John, Canada.

subsequent manipulations or reinterpretations of vague statements.

The People's Almanac of 1975 does, however, provide some data that enable us to surmount at least the latter problem. Each psychic was asked to record his or her predictions for the next few years. We can with hindsight now tabulate the results of their 1975 statements. (See Table I.)

This is a rather dismal performance. Out of the total of 72 predictions, 66 (or 92 percent) were dead wrong. Among the favorites in this category were those that China would go to war with the United States (predicted 4 times) and that New York City would soon be underwater (predicted 3 times). My favorite inept prognostication comes from the Berkeley Psychic Institute, which predicted a war between Greenland and the Soviet Union over fish. Since nuclear weapons were to be used, this war was to be very sensibly fought in Labrador in May 1977. How this conflict involving NATO territory would not result in a larger war was not explained by the seven "experienced psychics" making up this "institute."

TABLE I

Predictions of 21 Psychics
for period 1975-1981

Predictor	Right	Wrong	Partly Right/ Vague
Malcolm Bessent	0	2	0
David Bubar	1	3	0
Criswell	0	18	0
Joseph DeLouise	0	0	1
Jeane Dixon	0	4	0
Irene Hughes	0	1	0
Ann Jensen	2	3	0
Olof Jonsson	0	1	0
Bill Linn	0	2	0
Ethel J. Meyers	0	2	0
Dr. N	0	2	0
John Reeves	1	1	0
Shawn Robbins	0	9	1
Alan Vaughan	0	5	0
Berkeley Psychic Institute	0	13	0
<u>(7) experienced psychics</u>			
Totals	4	66	2

This table is confined to predictions for the period up to the end of 1981.

If we turn to the four predictions that we have rather generously termed "right," we find that there is more trouble in store for the psychics. Two of the correct predictions involve simple projections from contemporary trends. We do not need to invoke a paranormal explanation to understand how John Reeves could predict that Russia and the United States would "remain as leading world powers" or how Ann Jensen could predict that there would be no world wars from 1975 to 1980. The latter involves what might be called the negation of the ultimate-catastrophe prediction. If there is no war, then Ms. Jensen is right. She would be wrong if there was a world war, but then copies of *The People's Almanac* might be difficult to locate amid the radioactive debris. Her 1975 prediction of an end to fighting in Vietnam by 1980 might also be explained as a nonpsychic estimate based on a knowledge of political trends.

We are left with just one prediction out of 72 that is at all intriguing. In 1975 David Bubar predicted for the period 1975-1980: "There will be mass murders, a kind of genocide, in South America." What immediately springs to mind is the mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana, in November 1978. At the same time the vagueness of this prediction gives rise to doubts. The phrases in Bubar's statement might equally be applied to other events. Perhaps the actions of a repressive military junta might be interpreted as "a kind of genocide." An interview with a South American writer in the *Times* of London, for October 23, 1981, asserts that the persecution of journalists in Argentina must be seen as a "genocide."⁴ To which case of a kind of genocide does Bubar's prediction apply?

Even if we were to accept that four (or 6 percent) of the 72 predictions were correct (by setting aside quibbles about random chance, vague wordings, and simple projections from existing trends), a further problem remains. Since we do not know which of the 72 predictions will fall into the 6-percent correct category, then of what use is this? Who among us would take the advice of a tipster with a track record of being wrong more than nine times out of ten?

In 1978 *The People's Almanac #2* was published, and again the first pages were devoted to predictions by psychics. For some reason only three of the psychics from the 1975 publication were consulted again.⁵ Perhaps the discrepancy between, for example, Criswell's claim of 86 percent accuracy on his predictions and his actual performance of zero for 18 was already becoming evident.⁶ Did the editors then engage in an examination of the earlier set of predictions in their search for "the truth"? No. Instead, readers were presented with yet another list of prognostications by ten psychics who were given "past records" showing accurate predictions in more than two-thirds of their efforts.

When we come to examine the ability of this group to predict events of the period from 1979 to June 1982, we find a curious thing. (See Table 2.)⁷ Once again their collective success rate is very low, only 4 percent. Nineteen of their 25 predictions were dead wrong, 1 was correct, and 5 were

TABLE 2

Predictions of 8 Psychics
for the period
1979 to June 1982

Predictor	Right	Wrong	Partly Right/ Vague
Frederick Davies	0	1	1
Maris De Long	0	1	0
Joseph DeLouise	0	1	0
Jeane Dixon	0	0	1
Irene Hughes	0	11	2
Daniel Logan	0	3	0
Jandolin Marks	1	1	1
Kathy Sotka	0	1	0
Totals	1	19	5

too vague to determine. Kathy Sotka's prediction that Anwar Sadat's "health will steadily decline, and he will be unable to perform political duties after 1980" has been classified as wrong. Sadat was assassinated on October 6, 1981, making both parts of her prediction wrong. At the same time this example shows how a selective "reinterpretation" of her statement would make it yet another "correct" prediction.

The People's Almanac #3 was published in 1981 and it had a surprise for its readers.⁸ The traditional opening section on psychic predictions was eliminated without a word of explanation. Was this editorial decision the result of a learning experience and new insights about "the truth"?

In spite of the improved state of affairs at *The People's Almanac*, there can be little doubt that otherwise rational people will continue to believe in, accept, and even pay money to hear the plain guff spewed out by "psychics." Accordingly, I want to propose a simple and straightforward method for dealing with psychic prognosticators. My proposal is a simple one, since it does not involve rational argument or a knowledge of statistical inquiry.

A foundation would be set up in Las Vegas with a small amount of seed money to place bets on formal predictions made by psychics. This foundation would issue direct challenges to prognosticators to put their money where their collective mouths are. With the odds running at more than nine to one against the psychics, we would soon have a well-endowed research foundation (and a number of impoverished crystal-ball gazers).

Consider the certainty involved in betting against the fulfillment of the following predictions by Criswell:⁹

In 1982, a dying planet named Bullanon will come so close to earth that it will affect the earth's gravity, shifting the poles. This will cause the rising of a lost continent . . . and trigger earthquakes, the destruction of cities, eruption of volcanoes, storms, and tidal waves.

Between February 11 and May 11, 1983, all the women in St. Louis will lose their hair.

In 1985, polygamy will become legal in North Dakota.

Do we have any takers?

Notes

1. David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, eds., *The People's Almanac* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), p. xv.
2. Pages 1-11 were written by Ann Elwood and Irving Wallace.
3. Robert McLintic's predictions have been deleted because they are undated.
4. George Brock, "Remember the writers put behind bars," *Times*, London, Oct. 23, 1981.
5. David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, eds., *The People's Almanac #2* (New York: Bantam, 1978). Pages 1-8 and the psychic-prediction section were written by Richard De A'Morelli and Ann Elwood. Only Joseph DeLouise, Jeane Dixon, and Irene Hughes have predictions in both volumes.
6. See the first *People's Almanac* (1975), p. 2, for Criswell's claims of his accuracy and his knowledge of "the future through the year 1999." For the performance of another psychic washout, see James Randi, "'Superpsychic' Vaughan: Claims vs. the Record," *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*, Summer 1981, pp. 19-21.
7. The undated predictions of Tenny Hale and Kebrina Kincade have been deleted from this tabulation.
8. David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, eds., *The People's Almanac #3* (New York: Bantam, 1981).
9. *The People's Almanac* (1975), p. 3. ●

The Chance to Convey Science's Pleasures

Some scientists seem unwilling to engage in public confrontations on borderline science issues because of the effort required and the possibility that they will be perceived to lose a public debate. But it is an excellent opportunity to show how science works at its murkier borders, and also a way to convey something of its power as well as its pleasures.

—Carl Sagan in *Broca's Brain*