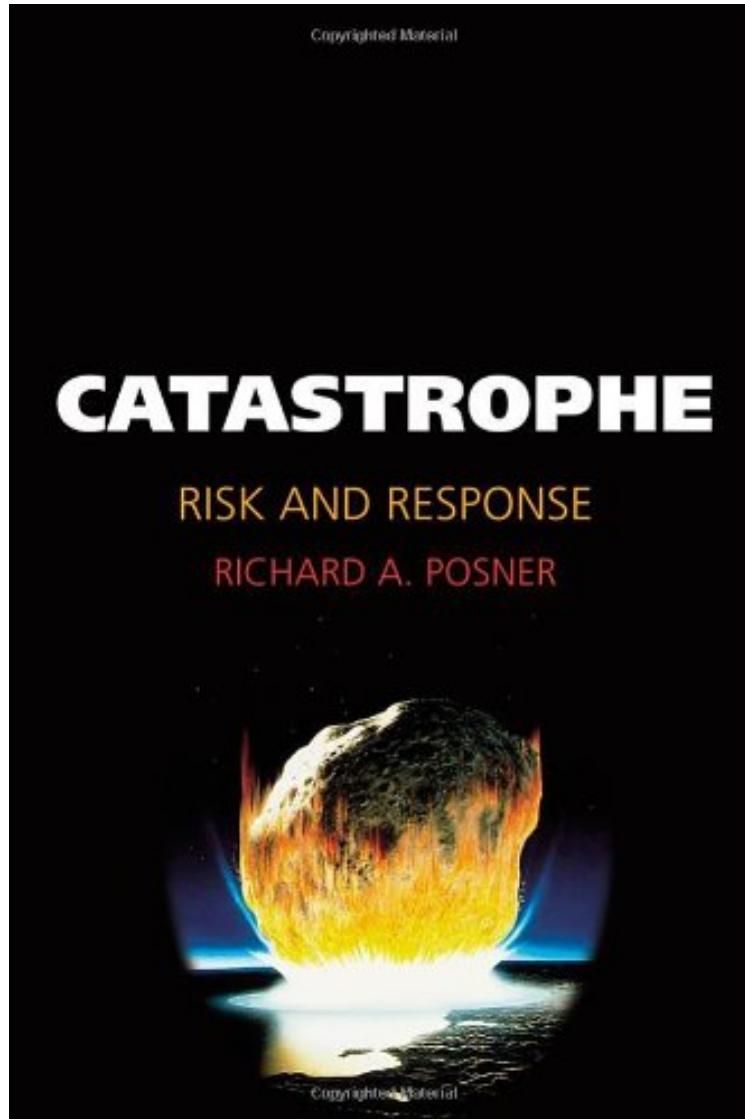


(Read free) Catastrophe: Risk and Response

## Catastrophe: Risk and Response

*Richard A. Posner*

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**Richard A. Posner : Catastrophe: Risk and Response** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Catastrophe: Risk and Response:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Proliferation of hazardous new technology threatens humankindBy Willard WellsWow, what a polymath! Posner is judge of the US Court of Appeals, 7th circuit. But on top of all that law he has learned science fairly well including probability theory and evolutionary biology. He explains some human behavior in terms of instincts we evolved by the Darwinian process, an argument you rarely see. But this doesn't make a great book. Posner sees no need to write his judicial opinions in an entertaining style because interested parties will

read them anyhow. He seems not to realize that writing popular books is a different game; people are far less motivated to read them. Oxford press did its part to discourage sales: the font is small and somewhat faint; words are divided at the ends of lines between the second and third letters; there are no pictures even though the topic cries out for them. Posner chose four hazards to track throughout the book, and two of those choices are unfortunate. The first is an asteroid strike. The risk of that is miniscule simply because we have such a long history of surviving it. Humanity has not been seriously at risk for 70,000 years. (Genetics tells us that humanity was reduced to a small population about that time thus reducing genetic diversity.) So if the next natural catastrophe occurs in the next 100 years, that means that we are now living in the last 1/700 of the interval between them, and the probability of that is only about 1/700. By contrast, we are living with man-made hazards after only a decade or so of adaptation. Posner makes a plea for various reforms to prevent catastrophe: international agencies, safety reviews of proposed science projects, new police powers, and so on. Posner never mentions that a major collapse of civilization would take out all the major threats to our species' survival. The aftermath would be a long period of safety for people who are wiser for the experience. So there's a paradox: measures that prevent catastrophe also jeopardize our species. I prefer to look outside the box and save Homo sapiens an entirely different way. Form survival colonies with about a 100 people (a viable breeding stock) and build redoubts in remote places to ride out as many different threats as you can. Wealthy people are already buying luxury apartments in abandoned missile silos and similar places. You can sign up as a candidate for a survival colony at the website of the Lifeboat Foundation. 18 of 23 people found the following review helpful. A Measured Approach to the Apocalypse By John Thorne I'm a big fan of the judge's books, but this one differs from the prior books in the breadth and gravity of its topic: avoiding extinction. The book has a gripping description of several such threats -- asteroids, bioterrorists, nuclear meltdown ("strangelets"), sudden global warming, loss of biodiversity. The book is worth buying for the description alone. The core problem in dealing with these extinction threats is the need to incur large present costs for only speculative future benefits, where the beneficiaries of today's investments will be unknown to anyone living today. Democracies, run by politicians who get voted into office promising benefits to the current voters, can't make such farsighted investments for the benefit of people not yet living (or more precisely, not yet voting). The best line in the book (near the beginning, so I don't think I'm spoiling it) is that there are probably many billions of stars with planets around them capable of supporting life. Life therefore probably originated independently on many millions of those planets, many of them probably much earlier than here on Earth. So why haven't we been contacted by any of the earlier, presumably more advanced other civilizations? 2 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Not a Dog in these Catastrophes By R. C. Jennings Great Book, thoughtful and somewhat idiosyncratic analysis of how we should think about and respond to low probability but very large consequence events. Works very well paired up with Robert Shillers book "Macro Markets"

Catastrophes, whether natural or man-made, that could destroy the human race are often dismissed as alarmist or fanciful, the stuff of science fiction. In fact the risk of such disasters is real, and growing. A collision with an asteroid that might kill a quarter of humanity in 24 hours and the rest soon after; irreversible global warming that might flip, precipitating "snowball earth;" voraciously replicating nanomachines; a catastrophic accident in a particle accelerator that might reduce the earth to a hyperdense sphere 100 meters across; a pandemic of gene-spliced smallpox launched by bioterrorists; even conquest by superintelligent robots--all these potential extinction events, and others, are within the realm of the possible and warrant serious thought about assessment and prevention. They are attracting the concern of reputable scientists--but not of the general public or the nation's policymakers. How should the nation and the world respond to disaster possibilities that, for a variety of psychological and cultural reasons, people find it hard to wrap their minds around? Richard Posner shows that what is needed is a fresh, thoroughly interdisciplinary perspective that will meld the insights of lawyers, economists, psychologists, and other social scientists with those of the physical sciences. Responsibility for averting catastrophe cannot be left either to scientists or to politicians and other policymakers ignorant of science. As in many of his previous books, Posner brings law and the social sciences to bear on a contemporary problem--in this case one of particular urgency. Weighing the risk and the possible responses in each case, Posner shows us what to worry about and what to dismiss, and discusses concrete ways of minimizing the most dangerous risks. Must we yield a degree of national sovereignty in order to deal effectively with global warming? Are limitations on our civil liberties a necessary and proper response to the danger of bioterror attacks? Would investing more heavily in detection and interception systems for menacing asteroids be money well-spent? How far can we press cost-benefit analysis in the design of responses to world-threatening events? Should the institutional framework of science policy be altered? we need educational reform? Is the interface of law and science awry? These are but a few of the issues canvassed in this fascinating, disturbing, and necessary book.

From Publishers Weekly During his career as a federal appeals court judge, Posner has become a prominently outspoken commentator on a variety of legal and cultural issues. Reading Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, for example, was the springboard for this reflection on the current lack of plans for dealing with large-scale disasters, like environmental upheavals, after which law and public policy would be open to blame for failing to keep pace with rapid

scientific advancement. Those familiar with Posner's extensive writings will not be surprised when he advocates applying cost-benefit analysis to determine which catastrophic threats are worth tackling first, though other suggestions will likely spark controversy. Criticizing the "blinkered perspective" of civil libertarians hung up on constitutional law, he finds certain curtailments of freedom an acceptable trade-off for preventing terrorist attacks and offers a lengthy justification of torture as one such option. Posner also offers subtle insights into the psychology of disaster preparedness, noting, for example, that science fiction movies in which the world is routinely saved inure us to the possibility of facing such threats in real life, as well as create undue faith in the saving grace of scientists. And his call for increased scientific literacy among public policy leaders may be too pragmatic to fault. Though clearly not for general readers, this thoughtful analysis may trickle down from the wonkocracy. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "We would be well advised to... take the message of this book seriously. We ignore it at (a small risk of) our (very great) peril."--The New York Times Book "Catastrophe is worth the price of the book simply for Posner's lively and readable summary of the apocalyptic dystopias that serious scientists judge to be possible."--Graham Allison, The Washington Post Book World "A fine lawyerly analysis.... Posner's perspective, very different from those held by most scientists, is a welcome addition to considerations of catastrophic risks."--Science "Will likely spark controversy.... subtle insights...[and] thoughtful analysis."--Publishers Weekly "Once again, Judge Posner has added to our cultural dialogue in a useful and interesting way."--Law and Politics Book "With a broad vision and powerful intellectual tools, Posner addresses issues vital to our 21st Century technological civilization. Catastrophe will make our world a safer place."--K. Eric Drexler, Founder and Chairman Emeritus of Foresight Institute, author of Nanosystems "The scientific community should pay attention to Judge Richard Posner's Catastrophe. Posner reminds us that we continue to deny or avoid dealing with low probability, high consequence natural and man made risks to society such as asteroid collisions, biodiversity, and terrorism. One of America's preeminent scholars of social issues presents a compelling analysis of the problem of catastrophic risks and needed public policy response." --John M. Deutch, Institute Professor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology "This book provides a balanced and immensely informative discussion of catastrophic risks to the planet, and makes a logical first stab at policy responses. It should stimulate far more attention to the growing threat of such catastrophes as bioterrorism, strangelet disasters from particle accelerators, and non-linear climate change, among the academic and policy community."--Ian W. H. Parry, Resources for the Future About the Author Richard A. Posner is a judge of the U.S. Court Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, and a senior lecturer at the University of Chicago Law School. He is the author of numerous books, including Overcoming Law, a New York Times Book editors' choice for best book of 1995 and An Affair of State: The Investigation, Impeachment, and Trial of President Clinton, one of Times' choices for Best Book of the Year in 1999 and a Los Angeles Times Book Prize Finalist, 2000.