

Murphy's Law

**and other
reasons why
things go
boom!**

Arthur Bloch

MURPHY'S LAW

**AND OTHER REASONS
WHY THINGS GO WRONG!**

By Arthur Bloch

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(*so named by the editors)

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ILLUSTRATED BY ELEANORE FAHEY

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PREFACE

Murphy's Law. *U.S. Informal.* The principle that whatever can possibly go wrong will. [Origin Unknown].

— Funk and Wagnalls, *Standard College Dictionary*, New York, Funk and Wagnalls.

Who was Murphy? What curious conspiracy of circumstances inspired him to formulate his now-famous precept? Why didn't he pick up his laundry? These are just a few of the many questions that I had no intention of answering in this book. Our finest scholars, experts in the fields of linguistics and folk history, have tried and failed to determine the origin of Murphy's Law. Who was I to argue with such a record?

Resigned as I was to go to print without resolving these burning questions, I was most surprised to receive the following letter from a certain Mr. George Nichols of Southern California:

Dear Arthur Bloch:

Understand you are going to publish a book, Murphy's Law — And Other Reasons Why Things Go Wrong. Are you interested in including the true story of the naming of Murphy's Law?

And, when I responded in the affirmative:

The event occurred in 1949 at Edwards Air Force Base, Muroc, California, during Air Force Project MX981. This was Col. J. P. Stapp's experimental crash research testing on the track at North Base. The work was being accomplished by Northrop Aircraft, under contract from the Aero Medical Lab at Wright Field. I was Northrop's project manager.

The Law's namesake was Capt. Ed Murphy, a development engineer from Wright Field Aircraft Lab. Frustration with a strap transducer which was malfunctioning due to an error in wiring the strain gage bridges caused him to remark — "If there is any way to do it wrong, he will" — referring to the technician who had wired the bridges at the Lab. I assigned Murphy's Law to the statement and the associated variations.

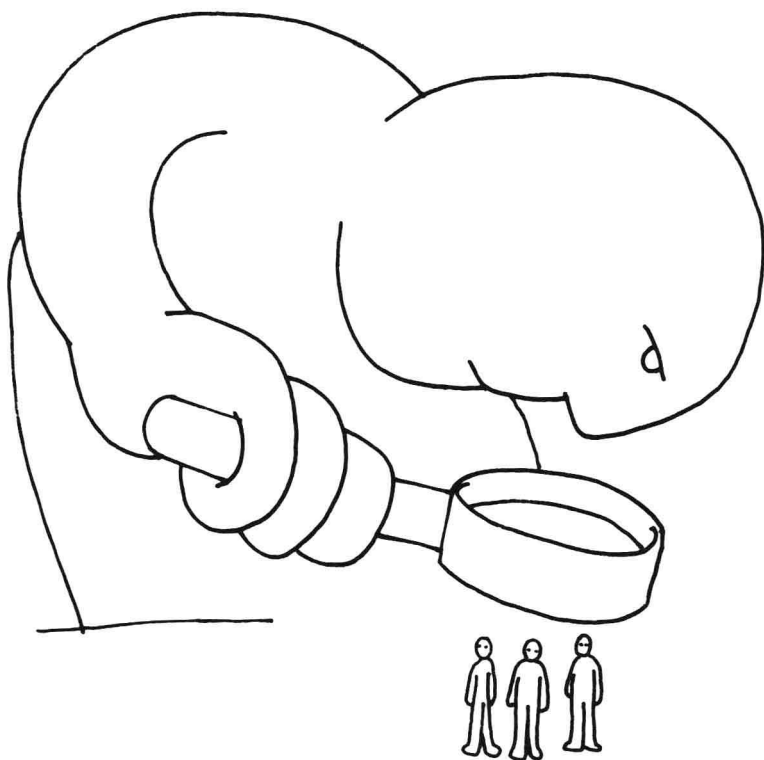
. . . A couple of weeks after the "naming" Col. Stapp indicated, at a press conference, that our fine safety record during several years of simulated crash force testing was the result of a firm belief in Murphy's Law, and our consistent effort to deny the inevitable. The widespread reference to the Law in manufacturers' ads within only a few months was fantastic — and Murphy's Law was off and running wild.

*Sincerely,
George E. Nichols
Reliability & Quality Assurance Mgr.
Viking Project
Jet Propulsion Lab — NASA*

Thus, thanks to Mr. Nichols's kindly missive, the plot thins; for here we have the answers to the aforementioned burning questions in more detail than we would have thought necessary. There only remains to find out why Ed Murphy didn't pick up his laundry.

Arthur Bloch
Berkeley, September, 1977

INTRODUCTION



Have you ever received a phone call the minute you sat down on the toilet? Has the bus you wanted ever appeared the instant you lit up a cigarette? Has it ever started raining on the day you washed your car, or stopped raining just after you bought an umbrella? Perhaps you realized at the time that something was afoot, that some universal principle was just out of your grasp, itching to be called by name. Or perhaps, having heard of Murphy's Law, the Peter Principle or the Law of Selective Gravity, you have wanted to invoke one of these, only to find that you have forgotten its exact wording.

Here, then, is the first compilation in book form of the wit and wisdom of our most delightfully demented technologists, bureaucrats, humanists, and anti-social observers, prepared and presented with the purpose of providing us all with a little Karmic Relief. The listing has been made as definitive as possible. In researching these interdisciplinary tenets, we found numerous redundancies (which verify the validity of the observations), frequent conflicting claims to authorship, and scores of anonymous donations. We are forced to

acknowledge the contribution of the inimitable Zymurgy, who said, "Once you open a can of worms, the only way to recan them is to use a larger can." By applying this Murphic morsel to the present volume, we come to realize that this project, once undertaken, must surely grow in size and scope as further principles, new and old, are revealed by our beacon of truth.

Throughout history pundits and poseurs have regaled us with the laws of the universe, the subtle yet immutable substructure which is the basis of cosmic order. From people of religion we have received the Moral Laws; from mystics, the Laws of Karma; from rationalists, the Laws of Logical Form; and from artists, the Laws of Aesthetics. Now it is the technologists' turn to bend our collective ear.

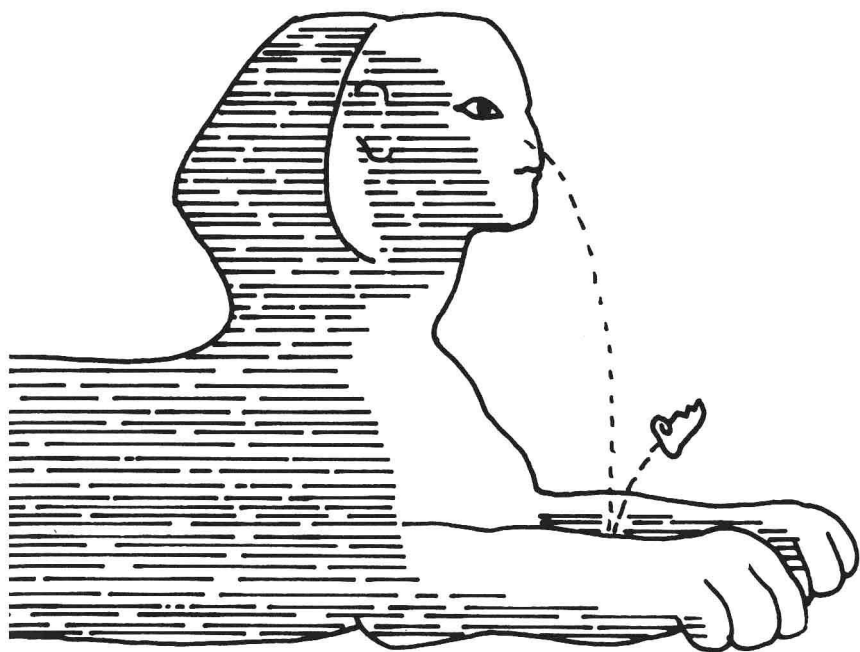
The official party line of technology, of science itself, is despair. If you doubt this, witness the laws of thermodynamics as they are restated in Ginsberg's Theorem. The universe is simmering down, like a giant stew left to cook for four billion years. Sooner or later we won't be able to tell the carrots from the onions.

"But what of the short run, the proverbial closed system?" you may well ask, as you sit gazing out of your penthouse window, sipping your vodka martini and watching the hustling throngs of God's

little creatures going about their business. Alas, we've only to look at this business, as exemplified in the good bureaucracy, through the eyes of Peter, Parkinson, et al. We will realize that it is only a matter of time before the microcosmic specks we call big business and government, like their universal counterpart, lose their ability to succeed in spite of themselves.

"We are on the wrong side of the tapestry." So said Father Brown, G. K. Chesterton's famous clerical sleuth. And indeed we are. A few loose ends, an occasional thread, are all we ever see of the great celestial masterwork of the most expensive carpet weaver of them all. A small number of courageous individuals have dared to explore the far side of the tapestry, have braved the wrath of the Keeper of the Rug in their search for truth. It is to these individuals that this volume is dedicated.

MURPHOLOGY



MURPHY'S LAW:

If anything can go wrong, it will.

Corollaries:

- 1. Nothing is as easy as it looks.**
- 2. Everything takes longer than you think.**
- 3. If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the one to go wrong.**
- 4. If you perceive that there are four possible ways in which a procedure can go wrong, and circumvent these, then a fifth way will promptly develop.**
- 5. Left to themselves, things tend to go from bad to worse.**
- 6. Whenever you set out to do something, something else must be done first.**
- 7. Every solution breeds new problems.**
- 8. It is impossible to make anything foolproof because fools are so ingenious.**
- 9. Nature always sides with the hidden flaw.**
- 10. Mother nature is a bitch.**

THE MURPHY PHILOSOPHY:

Smile . . . tomorrow will be worse.

MURPHY'S CONSTANT:

Matter will be damaged in direct proportion to its value.

QUANTIZATION REVISION OF MURPHY'S LAW:

Everything goes wrong all at once.

HILL'S COMMENTARIES ON MURPHY'S LAW:

1. If we lose much by having things go wrong, take all possible care.
2. If we have nothing to lose by change, relax.
3. If we have everything to gain by change, relax.
4. If it doesn't matter, it does not matter.

O'TOOLE'S COMMENTARY ON MURPHY'S LAW:

Murphy was an optimist.

ZYMURGY'S SEVENTH EXCEPTION TO MURPHY'S LAW:

When it rains, it pours.

BOLING'S POSTULATE:

If you're feeling good, don't worry. You'll get over it.

WHITE'S STATEMENT:

Don't lose heart . . .

Owen's Commentary on White's Statement:

. . . they might want to cut it out . . .

Byrd's Addition to Owen's Commentary on White's Statement:

. . . and they want to avoid a lengthy search.

ILES'S LAW:

There is always an easier way to do it.

Corollaries:

1. When looking directly at the easier way, especially for long periods, you will not see it.
2. Neither will Iles.

CHISHOLM'S SECOND LAW:

When things are going well, something will go wrong.

Corollaries:

1. When things just can't get any worse, they will.
2. Anytime things appear to be going better, you have overlooked something.

CHISHOLM'S THIRD LAW:

Proposals, as understood by the proposer, will be judged otherwise by others.