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Murphy's law

Murphy's law is an adage or epigram that is typically stated as: "Anything that can go wrong will go wrong".

History

The perceived perversity of the universe has long been a subject of comment, and precursors to the modern version of Murphy's law are not hard to find. Recent significant research in this area has been conducted by members of the American Dialect Society. ADS member Stephen Goranson has found a version of the law, not yet generalized or bearing that name, in a report by Alfred Holt at an 1877 meeting of an engineering society.

It is found that anything that can go wrong at sea generally does go wrong sooner or later, so it is not to be wondered that owners prefer the safe to the scientific.... Sufficient stress can hardly be laid on the advantages of simplicity. The human factor cannot be safely neglected in planning machinery. If attention is to be obtained, the engine must be such that the engineer will be disposed to attend to it.^[1]

Mathematician Augustus De Morgan on June 23, 1866 "Supplement to the Budget of Paradoxes," *The Athenaeum* no. 2017 page 836 col. 2 [and later reprints: e.g., 1872, 1915, 1956, 2000] wrote: "The first experiment already illustrates a truth of the theory, well confirmed by practice, what-ever can happen will happen if we make trials enough." In later publications "whatever can happen will happen" occasionally is termed "Murphy's law," which raises the possibility—if something went wrong—that "Murphy" is "De Morgan" misremembered (an option, among others, raised by Goranson on American Dialect Society list).^[2]

American Dialect Society member Bill Mullins has found a slightly broader version of the aphorism in reference to stage magic. The British stage magician Nevil Maskelyne wrote in 1908:

It is an experience common to all men to find that, on any special occasion, such as the production of a magical effect for the first time in public, everything that *can* go wrong *will* go wrong. Whether we must attribute this to the malignity of matter or to the total depravity of inanimate things, whether the exciting cause is hurry, worry, or what not, the fact remains.^[3]

The contemporary form of Murphy's law goes back as far as 1952, as an epigraph to a mountaineering book by Jack Sack, who described it as an "ancient mountaineering adage":

Anything that can possibly go wrong, does.^[4]

Fred R. Shapiro, the editor of the *Yale Book of Quotations*, has shown that in 1952 the adage was called "Murphy's law" in a book by Anne Roe, quoting an unnamed physicist:

he described [it] as "Murphy's law or the fourth law of thermodynamics" (actually there were only three last I heard) which states: "If anything can go wrong, it will."^[5]

In May 1951, in *Genetic Psychology Monographs* volume 43, page 204, Anne Roe gives a transcript of an interview (part of a Thematic Apperception Test, asking impressions on a photograph) with Theoretical Physicist number 3: "...As for himself he realized that this was the inexorable working of the second law of the thermodynamics which stated Murphy's law 'If anything can go wrong it will'." Anne Roe's papers are in the American Philosophical Society archives in Philadelphia; those records (as noted by Stephen Goranson on the American Dialect Society list 12/31/2008) identify the interviewed physicist as Howard Percy "Bob" Robertson (1903–1961). Robertson's papers are at the Caltech archives; there, in a letter Robertson offers Roe an interview within the first three months of 1949 (as noted by Goranson on American Dialect Society list 5/9/2009). The Robertson interview apparently predated the Muroc scenario said by Nick Spark (*American Aviation Historical Society Journal* 48 (2003) p. 169) to have occurred in or after June, 1949.

The name "Murphy's law" was not immediately secure. A story by Lee Correy in the February 1955 issue of *Astounding Science Fiction* referred to "Reilly's law," which "states that in any scientific or engineering endeavor,

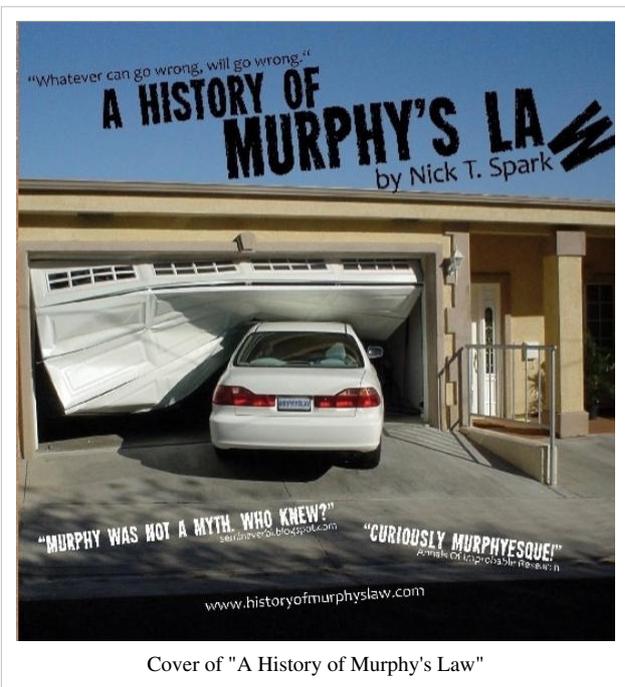
anything that can go wrong *will* go wrong".^[6] Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Lewis Strauss was quoted in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* on February 12, 1955, saying "I hope it will be known as Strauss' law. It could be stated about like this: If anything bad can happen, it probably will."^[7]

Arthur Bloch, in the first volume (1977) of his *Murphy's Law, and Other Reasons Why Things Go WRONG* series, prints a letter that he received from George E. Nichols, a quality assurance manager with the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Nichols recalled an event that occurred in 1949 at Edwards Air Force Base, Muroc, California that, according to him, is the origination of Murphy's law, and first publicly recounted by USAF Col. John Paul Stapp. An excerpt from the letter reads:

...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.^[8]

Association with Murphy

According to the book *A History of Murphy's Law* by author Nick T. Spark, differing recollections years later by various participants make it impossible to pinpoint who first coined the saying *Murphy's law*. The law's name supposedly stems from an attempt to use new measurement devices developed by the eponymous Edward Murphy. The phrase was coined in adverse reaction to something Murphy said when his devices failed to perform and was eventually cast into its present form prior to a press conference some months later — the first ever (of many) conferences given by Dr. John Stapp, a U.S. Air Force colonel and Flight Surgeon in the 1950s. These conflicts (a long running interpersonal feud) were unreported until Spark researched the matter. His book expands upon and documents an original four part article published in 2003 (*Annals of Improbable Research (AIR)*)^[9] on the controversy: *Why Everything You Know About Murphy's Law is Wrong*.



Cover of "A History of Murphy's Law"

From 1948 to 1949, Stapp headed research project MX981 at Muroc Army Air Field (later renamed Edwards Air Force Base)^[10] for the purpose of testing the human tolerance for g-forces during rapid deceleration. The tests used a rocket sled mounted on a railroad track with a series of hydraulic brakes at the end. Initial tests used a humanoid crash test dummy strapped to a seat on the sled, but subsequent tests were performed by Stapp, at that time an Air Force captain. During the tests, questions were raised about the accuracy of the instrumentation used to measure the g-forces Captain Stapp was experiencing. Edward Murphy proposed using electronic strain gauges attached to the restraining clamps of Stapp's harness to measure the force exerted on them by his rapid deceleration. Murphy was engaged in supporting similar research using high speed centrifuges to generate g-forces. Murphy's assistant wired the harness, and a trial was run using a chimpanzee.

The sensors provided a zero reading; however, it became apparent that they had been installed incorrectly, with each sensor wired backwards. It was at this point that a disgusted Murphy made his pronouncement, despite being offered

the time and chance to calibrate and test the sensor installation prior to the test proper, which he declined somewhat irritably, getting off on the wrong foot with the MX981 team. In an interview conducted by Nick Spark, George Nichols, another engineer who was present, stated that Murphy blamed the failure on his assistant after the failed test, saying, "If that guy has any way of making a mistake, he will." Nichols' account is that "Murphy's law" came about through conversation among the other members of the team; it was condensed to "If it can happen, it will happen," and named for Murphy in mockery of what Nichols perceived as arrogance on Murphy's part. Others, including Edward Murphy's surviving son Robert Murphy, deny Nichols' account (which is supported by Hill, both interviewed by Spark), and claim that the phrase did originate with Edward Murphy. According to Robert Murphy's account, his father's statement was along the lines of "If there's more than one way to do a job, and one of those ways will result in disaster, then somebody will do it that way."

The phrase first received public attention during a press conference in which Stapp was asked how it was that nobody had been severely injured during the rocket sled tests. Stapp replied that it was because they always took *Murphy's Law* under consideration; he then summarized the law and said that in general, it meant that it was important to consider all the possibilities (possible things that could go wrong) before doing a test and act to counter them. Thus Stapp's usage and Murphy's alleged usage are very different in outlook and attitude. One is sour, the other an affirmation of the predictable being surmountable, usually by sufficient planning and redundancy. Hill and Nichols believe Murphy was unwilling to take the responsibility for the device's initial failure (by itself a blip of no large significance) and is to be doubly damned for not allowing the MX981 team time to validate the sensor's operability and for trying to blame an underling when doing so in the embarrassing aftermath.

The association with the 1948 incident is by no means secure. Despite extensive research, no trace of documentation of the saying as *Murphy's law* has been found before 1951 (see above). The next citations are not found until 1955, when the May–June issue of *Aviation Mechanics Bulletin* included the line "Murphy's Law: If an aircraft part can be installed incorrectly, someone will install it that way,"^[11] and Lloyd Mallan's book, *Men, Rockets and Space Rats*, referred to: "Colonel Stapp's favorite takeoff on sober scientific laws—Murphy's Law, Stapp calls it—'Everything that can possibly go wrong will go wrong'." The Mercury astronauts in 1962 attributed Murphy's law to U.S. Navy training films.^[11]

Other variations on Murphy's law

From its initial public announcement, Murphy's law quickly spread to various technical cultures connected to aerospace engineering.^[12] Before long, variants had passed into the popular imagination, changing as they went.

Author Arthur Bloch has compiled a number of books full of corollaries to Murphy's law and variations thereof. These include the original *Murphy's Law and other reasons why things go wrong!*,^[13] *Murphy's Law Book Two*,^[14] *Murphy's Law Book Three*,^[15] *Murphy's Law: Doctors: Malpractice Makes Perfect*,^[16] and *Murphy's Law: Lawyers: Wronging the Rights in the Legal Profession!*.^[17] Later, a collection of three volumes was also published. This led to a corollary *Stores selling Volume I have not heard of Volume II; stores selling Volume II have run out of Volume I*.^[18]

There have been persistent references to Murphy's law associating it with the laws of thermodynamics right from the very beginning (see the quotation from Anne Roe's book above).^[5] In particular, Murphy's law is often cited as a form of the second law of thermodynamics (the law of entropy) because both are predicting a tendency to a more disorganised state.^[19]

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Further reading

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- Matthews received the Ig Nobel Prize for physics in 1996 for this work (see list).

External links

- A collection of humorous Murphy's Laws (http://www.xs4all.nl/~jcdverha/scijokes/9_6.html)
- 1952 proverb citation (<http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0312D&L=ads-l&P=R1143&m=34014>)
- 1955 term citation of phrase "Murphy's Law" (<http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0401D&L=ads-l&P=R3581&m=34014>)
- Examples of the mathematical formula for Murphy's Law (<http://bi-guru.ca/portal/modules/news/article.php?storyid=2>)
- Murphy's Law entry (<http://catb.org/~esr/jargon/html/M/Murphys-Law.html>) in the Jargon File
- Murphy's Law of Combat (<http://www.military-quotes.com/murphy.htm>)
- Murphy's Laws Origin (<http://www.murphys-laws.com/murphy/murphy-true.html>)
- Reference to 1941 citation of the proverb (<http://listserv.linguistlist.org/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0309C&L=ads-l&P=R998>)
- The *Annals of Improbable Research* tracks down the origins of Murphy's law (<http://www.improb.com/archives/paperair/volume9/v9i5/murphy/murphy0.html>)

Muphry's law

Muphry's law is an adage that states that "if you write anything criticizing editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written". The name is a deliberate misspelling of Murphy's law.

Similar laws have also been coined, usually in the context of online communication, under names including **Skitt's Law**,^[1] **Hartman's Law of Prescriptivist Retaliation** (or The Law of Prescriptive Retaliation),^[1] **The Iron Law of Nitpicking**,^{[2][3]} and **McKean's Law**.^{[4][5]} Further variations state that flaws in a printed or published work will only be discovered after it is printed and not during proofreading,^[6] and flaws such as spelling errors in a sent email will be discovered by the sender only during its subsequent retrieval by her/him from the "Sent" box for rereading.

History

John Bangsund of the Society of Editors (Victoria) in Australia identified Muphry's law as "the editorial application of the better-known Murphy's law"^{[7][8]} and set it down in 1992 in the Society of Editors Newsletter.^[9]

The law, as set out by Bangsund, states that:

- (a) if you write anything criticizing editing or proofreading, there will be a fault of some kind in what you have written;
- (b) if an author thanks you in a book for your editing or proofreading, there will be mistakes in the book;
- (c) the stronger the sentiment expressed in (a) and (b), the greater the fault;
- (d) any book devoted to editing or style will be internally inconsistent.^[9]

It goes on to say:

Muphry's Law also dictates that, if a mistake is as plain as the nose on your face, everyone can see it but you. Your readers will always notice errors in a title, in headings, in the first paragraph of anything, and in the top lines of a new page. These are the very places where authors, editors and proofreaders are most likely to make mistakes.^[7]

Muphry's law may be interpreted to be in accordance to a previous quote from Ambrose Bierce:

In neither taste nor precision is any man's practice a court of last appeal, for writers all, both great and small, are habitual sinners against the light; and their accuser is cheerfully aware that his own work will supply (as in making this book it has supplied) many "awful examples". ("Write it Right: A Little

Blacklist of Literary Faults" 1909)^[10]

Examples

Stephen J. Dubner described learning of the existence of Muphry's law in the Freakonomics section of *The New York Times* in July 2008. He had accused *The Economist* of a typo in referring to Cornish pasties being on sale in Mexico, assuming that "pastries" had been intended and being familiar only with the word "pasties" with the meaning of nipple coverings. A reader had alerted him to the existence of the law, and *The Economist* had responded by sending him a Cornish pasty.^[11]

In 2009, the then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown hand-wrote a letter of condolence to a mother whose son had died in Afghanistan, during which he misspelled the deceased's surname. *The Sun* (a tabloid newspaper) published a vitriolic article criticizing his lack of care. In this article, the paper misspelled the same name and was forced to publish an apology of its own.^{[12][13]}

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