

The Premonition: A Pandemic Story

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The Premonition: A Pandemic Story, by Michael Lewis. New York: W. W. Norton, 2021. 320 pages. \$15.

Upon starting Michael Lewis's *The Premonition: A Pandemic Story*, the reader anticipates a sobering account of what occurred in the run-up to the emergence and spread of COVID-19 across the United States. The book is that, but much more as well, as told from the point of view of those who saw the pandemic coming. The surprising thing about *The Premonition* is that it is also at times a feel-good story about how government *can* work—even amid a crisis of epic proportions.

When government does work, it can be *despite* bureaucratic organizations as much as *because of* them, and owing, either way, to the people who hold public office and make decisions, and those who advise those who do. Lewis's book is nonpartisan on this aspect, identifying troubling dynamics in modern-day government decision-making and organizational behaviors that, when it comes to dealing with potential pandemics, date back at least to the mid-1970s (and, in some ways, as far back as the 1918 flu outbreak). When government does work, it is the integrity, expertise, and ingenuity of local, state, and federal officials that ultimately matter. As with heroes anywhere, during times of crisis some people will shun responsibility, while others will rise to meet the challenge, realizing that in a crisis putting off difficult decisions is simply not an option.

The Premonition details pandemic-related decision-making dynamics that hold lessons for other national-security

concerns as well. Lewis presents these insights via an intriguing narrative centered on a motley group of public-health officials and experts dubbed “the Wolverines,” after the protagonists of the late-Cold War flick *Red Dawn*. The Wolverines find one another through their efforts to comprehend the COVID outbreak and then to aid the U.S. government in responding to it. It is their stories—of travails and occasional successes—that provide a heartbeat to an otherwise essentially dire pandemic tale. It is in this way, too, that *The Premonition* is a study of what went *right* in terms of experts anticipating the magnitude of the pandemic that COVID would become in the United States, despite the difficulty the government at all levels found in responding, or responding effectively and in a timely manner, to the crisis.

Lewis's retelling of the emergence of COVID and the growing realization of its ominous implications also well illustrates how policy makers must make tough decisions on the basis of incomplete and uncertain information. This hard truth is especially pertinent to public-health policy decisions, where delays in making decisions can lead to exponentially higher death tolls. As the author recounts, “The only clear signal you get from the virus is death” (p. 227).

The Premonition interestingly also details how policy makers rely on outside expertise, whether from former government officials, think-tank experts, academics, business executives, or even foreign experts; this especially holds true in the midst of an international crisis of historic proportions. Lewis's book highlights some of the tools and tactics, as well as the means and channels, by which those on the

outside—including some with no prior interaction with or connections to the White House or other parts of the Washington bureaucracy—influenced national-policy decision-making.

The narrative tracks one idea's origins from a student science fair to a rejected academic paper to a White House briefing, with the concept ultimately becoming the foundation for a key component in the nation's response to COVID. The point of the story is that, in a crisis, policy makers are in search of and often open to good ideas wherever they might arise. Yet, as Lewis's story also makes clear, good ideas are likely to be listened to only if they are framed in a way that addresses the problem that policy makers are facing and at the time they are searching for a solution; in influencing policy decision-making, timing can be everything.

Finally, Lewis's narrative makes clear that high-stakes policy decision-making and advising are not for the faint of heart or play-it-safe-style bureaucrats and careerists. The personal cost of having policy influence can be high at times, particularly when stakes are elevated and lives are on the line. As Lewis notes at one point in his retelling, "A system was groping toward a solution, but the solution required someone in it to be brave, and the system didn't reward bravery" (p. 226). Yet when personal ambition is weighed against the public welfare, there are some who will act decisively on behalf of the latter. We all can be grateful that such people exist.

Anyone wanting to understand better how and why government at any level works well—or not at all—in responding to major crises will find this account of the run-up

to the COVID crisis both inspiring and frustrating. But ultimately the time will be well spent.

KATHLEEN A. WALSH



The Craft of Wargaming: A Detailed Planning Guide for Defense Planners and Analysts, by Jeff Appleget, Robert Burks, and Fred Cameron. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2020. 376 pages. \$39.95.

The Craft of Wargaming is a superb book on how "art" and "science" can interact to enrich the craft of war gaming. The three authors detail how a range of disciplines shape the wargaming profession, process, and product. Here theory meets application by exploring how different case studies, exercises, and varied approaches inform analytical war gaming and its applicability to the planning process.

War games alone can neither prevent nor predict war, but they provide a bloodless (though not inexpensive) platform to inform hard choices, confront contemporary challenges, and ensure that leaders at all levels are prepared when competition transitions to conflict and combat. The authors build on extant literature with lessons observed to provide the opportunity for students and practitioners alike to understand, employ, and exploit war gaming better. *The Craft of Wargaming* is informed both by these experiences of working with students to execute their own war games and by working with sponsors considering complex challenges related to both potential near-future conflict and far-horizon force design.

The book is designed to help readers better understand a six-phase approach: to (1) teach, (2) apply, (3) do, (4) learn, (5) repeat, and (6) improve. This is