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~ book reviews of interest to the aviation professional

Antifragile:

Things That Gain from Disorder

By Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Published by The Random House Publishing Group, 2012, New York, 507p
Available in hardcover, paperback, and Kindle formats.

A book review by CPT Sean Clement

Antifragile: Things That Gain from Disorder is the fourth of five books written by the former Wall Street trader, scholar, and statistician Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his Incerto series. Taleb's previous works, include his prophetic book *The Black Swan* (2007) where he is credited with predicting the banking and economic crisis of 2008 and the Syrian civil war based on the inability of business leaders, bureaucrats, and politicians alike to understand fragility and its consequences. The central theme of *Antifragile* is to expound on the ideas of fragility presented in his previous works and to explain in clear terms the differences between fragility,

robustness, and antifragility, how to identify fragility, and steps to reduce fragility to the point of robustness of antifragility.

While some readers will no doubt find Taleb's bombastic tone off putting his points, which are delivered in simple, easy to digest terms are hard to ignore. At some point in the book it is likely that Taleb will say something that annoys the reader, however, it should be kept in mind that his diction is derived from the passion he holds on the topic and its implications rather than an attack ad hominem. His pension for repetition is a tactic

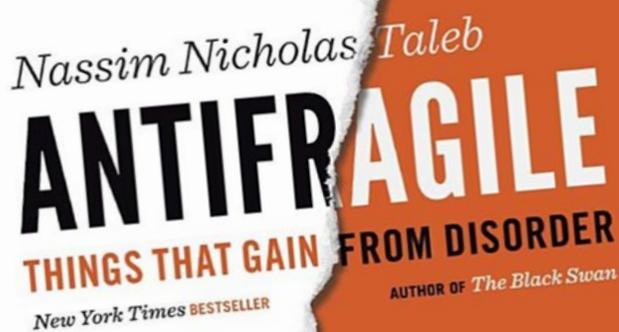
of emphasis and done deliberately. Readers who know these two facts early in the book will have a much easier time digesting its content. Central to understanding *Antifragile* and its concepts is that antifragility is not the same as robustness. A robust person or system will remain relatively unaffected by exposure to change, volatility, and randomness; however, according to Taleb, the antifragile person will become stronger. Once the reader can accept these concepts as distinct, a full understanding of Taleb's central point becomes possible.

Which is that we, as individuals and organizations, vastly overestimate our understanding of rare events, which Taleb names black swans, and that our attempts to control randomness is mostly useless and sometimes dangerous.

To be more specific, we underestimate the frequency of rare events, underestimate the fragility of our systems to these changes, and lack the understanding to accurately predict large scale events.

Some may wonder about his condemnation of prediction when he is credited with predicting both the Syrian civil war and the economic crisis. Taleb would respond to this by saying no one can predict exactly what the "black swan" event will look like but we can identify, as he did, the fragility in our systems which, given enough time, will fail. This central idea and its supporting concepts can change everything you think you know about understanding, evaluating, and managing risk in your organizations. An in depth technical understanding of statistics or mathematics is not needed to understand and appreciate Taleb's points in the book, although more technical writing and explanations are available for his examples via his website. Anyone who is, has, or will be in a leadership position within the Army should take the time to read and digest this book. Taleb artfully explains mathematical and philosophical concepts of risk management using simple heuristics, modern examples, classical literature, and autobiographical accounts. His recurring themes of skin in the game, via negative, the Lindy effect, barbell strategy, and the green lumbar fallacy highlight incorrect and often dangerous or immoral mistakes we as leaders can make in not fully appreciating the randomness and complexity of our world.

Antifragile explains how we underestimate the occurrence of rare events (black swans) and how we can detect the vulnerability of our systems to those events before they occur. In doing so, we can learn to make our military organizations more robust and perhaps even antifragile to the randomness and volatility of modern combat. His heuristics of detection and system design are well worth the time of any Army leader looking for the next edge in organizational theory or using statistics to improve their organization.



Nassim Nicholas Taleb
ANTIFRAGILE
THINGS THAT GAIN FROM DISORDER
New York Times BESTSELLER
AUTHOR OF *The Black Swan*

"Startling... richly crammed with insights, stories, fine phrases and intriguing asides... I will have to read it again. And again."
—Matt Ridley, *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

