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The cost of superstition

Beware the Ides of March? Rue Friday the 13th? New research suggests that superstition can cost the economy millions—or boost it, the Tribune's Lisa Anderson reports.

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12:15 PM CDT, March 16, 2008

NEW YORK

A word of warning to those who believe in lucky numbers, auspicious colors and star-crossed dates: Beware. The Ides of March are upon us.

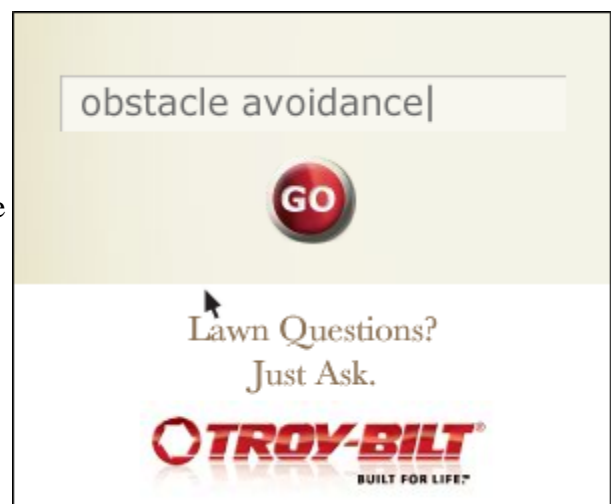
Only those familiar with history or [William Shakespeare](#)'s play "Julius Caesar" readily may recognize the reference to March 15, the day of Caesar's assassination in 44 B.C. The Roman calendar designated monthly Ides, or midpoint, days that fell either on the 13th or 15th day, depending on the month.

After Caesar's untimely exit, superstitious Romans well may have avoided launching a business, marriage or other important venture on a date so cloaked in doom it eventually entered the lexicon as a metaphor for impending catastrophe.

Despite vast advances in knowledge and technology over the last 2,000 years, it turns out people today aren't so different from the ancients when it comes to superstition and the way it affects decision-making and the economy, according to research.

Researchers estimate that U.S. businesses lose between \$800 and \$900 million every Friday the 13th—bad luck on that day is one of the most prevalent superstitions among Americans—due to factors including absenteeism and reluctance to travel or make decisions. It is estimated that as many as 9 percent of Americans are paraskevidekatriaphobics (pronounced pair-uh-skev-vee-day-cat-tree-uh-foe-bicks), that is, fearful of Friday the 13th. That is not to be confused with triskaidekaphobia, fear of the number 13. Otis Elevator Co. estimates about 15 percent of its elevators around the world omit the 13th floor button, according to Elizabeth Young, manager of communications at Otis.

There are a number of explanations for the belief that Friday the 13th is unlucky. But, the most common



has a Christian root, according to Phillips Stevens, professor of anthropology and an expert on magic, sorcery and witchcraft at the University of New York at Buffalo.

"Thirteen is the number of people at the Last Supper and the crucifixion took place on a Friday. So, when you have both coming together, that's a double whammy," Stevens said. He noted it, like many superstitions, offers an example of "magical thinking" involving "establishing these connections through which power can flow."

Clearly, Americans prefer to play it safe on those days, according to a study by researchers at Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business in New York. The goal of the study, to be published in the April issue of the *Journal of Consumer Research*, was to increase scientific evidence in the relatively new field of examining the marketing implications of superstitious beliefs for consumer behavior.

"We began this because there was more and more anecdotal evidence that managers were designing into their promotional programs the idea that consumers are responding to superstitions," said Lauren Block, professor of marketing at Baruch, who conducted the study with Thomas Kramer, an assistant professor of marketing at the school.

For instance, they cited a [Continental Airlines](#) advertisement—"\$888 to Beijing. Lucky You"—prominently featuring the number 8, considered the luckiest by Chinese, as an example of using cultural superstitious beliefs in marketing. They also note that "the Bank of China opened its doors in Hong Kong on August 8, 1988—considered to be the luckiest day of the century." And the Beijing Olympics are slated to open on August 8, 2008 at 8 p.m. No coincidence.

While the researchers knew superstition sometimes plays a role in marketplace choices, "it's the magnitude of the effect, I think, we weren't expecting," Kramer said.

He cited one aspect of the study that indicated Taiwanese consumers were more likely to pay more for a radio with a higher but "lucky" price of \$888 Taiwan dollars (TW\$) than the same radio tagged at a lower but neutral price of TW\$777. Consumers also were more likely to buy a digital camera with the higher but neutral price of TW\$6,555.55 than when it carried the lower but "unlucky" price of TW\$6,444.44. The number four is unlucky in Chinese and Japanese cultures because the word for four sounds like the words for death in those languages.

The number is considered so unlucky and stress-producing that on the fourth day of each month cardiac deaths among Chinese- and Japanese-Americans spiked 7 percent compared with other days, according to a massive 2002 study led by David Phillips, a sociologist at the University of [California](#) at [San Diego](#).

"That's what it looked like. The mortality for Chinese and Japanese spiked on the fourth of each month, and you find no such spike in Anglos on that date," said Phillips, who noted no similar phenomenon among non-Asian Americans on Friday the 13th. As for Americans and Friday the 13th, in a study involving 95 students at an East Coast university the Baruch researchers found that having a group of participants think about Friday the 13th and qualities associated with it rendered them more risk-averse than a group instructed to think about Tuesday the 19th, a neutral date.

Subjects then were introduced to what they were told was an unrelated study in which they were given a choice in a wagering situation between a bet that would pay a guaranteed \$18 or one with a 20 percent chance to win \$240. Those participants who earlier had pondered Friday the 13th chose the guaranteed or safe option 49 percent of the time compared with 35 percent of those who had reflected on the neutral date.

Sonya Gotz, a fitness instructor in New York, said she also avoids taking risks on Friday the 13th. She added, "I also think the full moon is more auspicious for starting things" but "definitely not the new moon."

The persistence of irrational beliefs in the modern day doesn't surprise Stuart Vyse, professor of psychology at Connecticut College and author of "Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition."

"Although the products of science are all around us, people don't think scientifically. They still are very intuitive and don't think about evidence and reason and logic in their everyday lives," he said.

But as superstition may affect economics, so too is the reverse true.

"One of my favorite examples is the use of salt to dissipate the bad luck of spilling salt," said Edmund Kern, a professor of history at Wisconsin's Lawrence University, referring to the practice of throwing salt over one's shoulder.

"This superstition emerges only in the 18th Century and becomes prominent in the 19th century as the price of salt drops dramatically. As salt moves from being a luxury good to a commodity," he said, "people seem more willing to waste additional salt in order to undo the negative effects of spilling it in the first place. So, I think that's a good example of a superstition having an economic basis."

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