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[Home](#) > Gene Healy: Ours is a most peaceful era

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I'm a pessimist by nature, but when the New Year dawns, I like to step out of character and look for the bright side. So here's this column's little ray of sunshine for 2011. Bask in it while you can -- we'll soon return to our regularly scheduled programming of unrelenting cynicism and negativity. "These are dangerous times," politicians keep telling us. That's the basis for uberhawk John Bolton's bid for the 2012 GOP presidential nomination. The combative former U.N. ambassador reminds us "of what a tough and dangerous world this is," Ari Fleischer told the Politico recently.

So dangerous, apparently, that some conservatives think only a man with a serious mustache can face up to it.

The thing is, though, these aren't particularly dangerous times. "Today we are probably living in the most peaceful moment of our species' time on earth," cognitive scientist Steven Pinker notes.

Over the last half-century, in particular, the data on global violence "paint a shockingly happy picture" of dramatic declines in mass killing.

The latest Human Security Report, tracking trends in political violence, provides more good news: "High-intensity wars, those that kill at least 1,000 people a year, have declined by 78 percent since 1988."

But hasn't the decline in mass killing by nation-states been matched by a rise in privatized violence by terrorist groups? Hardly.

In his 2008 book "The Science of Fear," Daniel Gardner points out that "in the last century, fewer than twenty terrorist attacks killed more than a hundred people." Sept. 11 was a horrific anomaly, and there's very little evidence to justify hysteria over weapons of mass destruction.

"I don't think the threat is growing but quite the opposite," says WMD expert Dr. Milton Leitenberg of the University of Maryland. "The idea that four guys in a cave are going to create bioweapons from scratch -- that will be never, ever, ever."

To kill loads of people, it usually takes a state. And states in recent decades have been markedly more reluctant to do it.

Why is that? Some political scientists look to the theory of the democratic peace -- arguing that democracies rarely go to war with one another and we have far more democracies today than we did 50 years ago.

Ironically enough, over the last decade some neocons invoked democratic peace theory in support of ... more wars. Democratize rogue states at gunpoint, the theory went, and you'll create a safer world.

Columbia University professor Erik Gartzke offers an alternative theory, the capitalist peace. He found that the statistical correlation between economic freedom and peace is vastly greater than the relationship between representative government and peace.

The new Human Security Report echoes that line of reasoning: "Greatly increased levels of international trade and foreign direct investment have raised the costs of conquest and shrunk its benefits," the authors write. "In today's open global trading system, it is almost always cheaper to acquire goods and raw materials by trade than to invade a country in order to steal them."

Free trade leads to a wealthier world, and a wealthier world is a safer world.

None of this justifies the silly notion that we've reached the end of history. But unjustified pessimism can sometimes steer us just as wrong as Pollyannish optimism.

"The whole aim of practical politics," H.L. Mencken once observed, "is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins."

Thus, we owe it to ourselves to examine the evidence on just how dangerous the world is today. We may discover we've got little reason to be so easily alarmed -- and easily led.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and the author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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