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Think things are bad now? Actually, they're really good

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Everything is terrible and nothing works. Or so the reporting goes.

American politics has devolved into a war of all against all, some defending the president, others attacking him, and many who are content simply to attack his attackers. Republicans blame the dominant GOP for accomplishing little while Democrats blame them for turning America into a hybrid of “The Man in the High Castle” and “The Handmaid’s Tale.”

Zoom out the camera lens to the wider world and the headlines are still worse. Russia is undermining democratic institutions in the U.S. and Europe, the Syrian civil war unleashes another atrocity every few days, and terror attacks continue to pile up their grisly body count.

World poverty is down. Way down

This unrelenting march of miseries is causing many to lose hope. But let me recommend, especially to my fellow newshounds, that we pull back the zoom lens even farther. When you look at this singular moment over the course of recent history, things aren’t looking so bad. In fact, they’re really, really good.

Before I’m labeled a Pollyanna, just review the data. Research institutions around the globe have confirmed and reconfirmed dramatic improvements in well-being, especially in the developing world. Health, economics, the environment ... you name it, the trend lines are up.

For most of human history, according to Thomas Hobbes, life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.” The statistics from 200 years ago back up his assessment, as more than 90 percent of humanity lived below the poverty line when adjusted for inflation. Today, the World Bank notes that just 9 percent live there, the lowest level of poverty in recorded history.

The UN’s World Poverty Clock demonstrates that every second, another person escapes extreme poverty, and that number is about a quarter of it was in 1990. In fact, there has been more economic output over the last two centuries than in all of the previous centuries combined, thanks to freer markets around the globe.

Health, education, war? We're winning

Look at health trends. Life expectancy is at an all-time high, infant mortality is at an all-time low, and more mothers survive childbirth than ever before. Deaths due to cancer, infectious diseases, natural disasters, and even car crashes have plummeted.

Technological progress is a big reason for the health improvements, and it also has improved agricultural yields and water productivity. Despite the Earth supporting more people than ever, hunger too is at its lowest recorded level, forest area is expanding in China, and emissions are falling in the U.S.

I hope you aren't tired of winning yet, because there's more good news.

Battle deaths and armed conflicts are down and, in a historical rarity, there are currently no international wars. Violent crime in the U.S. has fallen sharply in the past 25 years, as has violence against women and children.

More people receive more schooling than ever before and literacy has gone from 12 percent two centuries ago to 83 percent today.

If it's better, why don't we believe it?

The website Human Progress has dedicated itself to highlighting this good news, backed by empirical data and jaw-dropping charts, many of them linked above.

“Unfortunately, there is often a wide gap between the reality and public perception,” the site’s creators state, “including that of many policymakers, scholars in unrelated fields, and intelligent lay persons. To make matters worse, the media emphasizes bad news, while ignoring many positive long-term trends.”

This negative bias has resulted in just 8 percent of Americans believing that extreme poverty has decreased in the last 20 years.

“If it bleeds, it leads,” has long been the media’s M.O., which by nature focuses on the immediate instead of the long-term. This is made worse by vote-hungry politicians insisting that everything is terrible and only they can fix it.

Granted, 9 percent of the population living below the poverty line is still far too high. Education, crime prevention and environmental damage also show significant room for improvement. But an honest look at the big picture shows that life has never been better.

And by not giving into despair, it encourages each of us to make life better still.