

NATIONAL REVIEW

There Are a Lot of Reasons to Feel Optimistic about America's Future

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After Wednesday's gloom, here are a few thoughts about reasons for optimism for the future . . .

We groan that we're governed by crooks, incompetents, and morons, but we've actually done a pretty good job of solving the problems that faced this country a generation ago.

Crime rates? Way down from the 1990s. Drunk-driving rates? They hit a new all-time low a few years ago. Air travel keeps getting safer and cheaper.

Teen-pregnancy rates? Steadily declining. The abortion rate? The lowest since *Roe v. Wade* passed. Our infant-mortality rate is low and getting even lower.

High-school graduation rates? Highest level ever. With the exception of marijuana, teen drug use is down dramatically. Very few teenagers are succumbing to the national opioid-abuse epidemic. Teenage binge drinking is way lower than in the 1990s.

Slightly more than a third of American adults have a four-year college degree, the highest level ever measured by the U.S. Census Bureau. College enrollment has dropped by 2.4 million since 2011 . . . but one might interpret that as a customer base rejecting an overpriced product.

You've heard about the low unemployment rate. When Vice President Mike Pence boasts that more Americans are working than ever before, skeptics scoff that it simply reflects that the American population is larger than ever before. But there are now more job openings than unemployed workers. The all-time high in the employment-to-population ratio was 64.7 percent in April 2000; we're currently at 60.4 percent. It got as low as 58.2 in 2010. (Census Bureau figures indicate that 4.4 percent of those 85 or older are still working!)

Census Bureau data indicate that the median U.S. household income in 2016 was \$59,039 — and that the past two years combined have shown the fastest growth since the 1960s. The poverty rate is 12.7 percent, almost but not quite to pre-Great Recession levels. Yes, we would like to see some better numbers for wage growth, but separate Labor Department data just released days ago showed workers' wages and salaries increased 2.8 percent over the past year. The Federal Reserve and Wall Street economic forecasters feel confident for the future.

We fear terrorism, but one of the reasons that terrorism and asymmetrical warfare is rising is because conventional war is growing rarer. We don't have many country-vs.-country wars anymore, and that's a blessing. We have Russia's small-scale war against Ukraine. We have civil wars — Syria, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Yemen, Mexico's struggle against the cartels. (Even in these cases, on a global scale, the number of casualties is declining, although it's fair to wonder how accurately they can count the dead in places like Syria.) But you don't see tanks and artillery crossing borders the way you used to — and that's a blessing.

Every day since 9/11, the jihadists have wanted to execute the most spectacular attack they could. Most days they achieve nothing. Some days they launch attacks in places most Americans have never heard of, and once in a great while, they launch an attack on American soil with a fraction of the casualties of 9/11. We live in a world where most Americans don't think about terrorism every day, a condition that was unthinkable 17 years ago.

Osama bin Laden is dead. Mullah Omar's dead too. The Islamic State doesn't control any territory anymore, and we don't hear from Ayman al-Zawahiri or Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi much. Considering where we were, and what we feared would follow 9/11, the jihad against the United States must be classified as a catastrophic failure so far.

Coalition military casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan are down dramatically in the past five years.

Yes, we live in an era of serious challenges to American military superiority. But we still have some pretty ingenious minds giving us an edge. DARPA is developing drones that will never need to land or refuel; space planes; swarms of tiny flying robots, IED-proof vehicles that don't need windows; and guided rounds capable of zeroing in on a target, enabling novice shooters to hit moving targets. (That's right: Someday soon, we'll be able to shoot around corners.) Lockheed Martin is developing hypersonic weapons, missiles that travel at Mach 5, roughly one mile per second. No wonder no one wants to get into conventional wars with us anymore.

If you grew up in the 1990s, you probably thought AIDS would be the scourge of the 21st century. New drugs and treatment drove the HIV mortality rate down in the United States by more than 80 percent, and the number of new infections is down by two-thirds. In the 15 years since the Bush administration enacted PEPFAR — the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief — the program has saved 14 million lives.

One of the laments on Wednesday was the ever-growing economic power of Amazon. Still, the company largely earned its way to the top with a revolutionary service. Think about it: You can get just about any book, movie, DVD set, toy, article of clothing, or gadget ever created delivered to your door for a pretty modest price. This is a gift of knowledge, art, and literature on a scale that was inconceivable for most of human history. Just a generation ago, readers were limited to what the manager of their local bookstore or B. Dalton thought was a good title.

Whatever old toy or knickknack you loved as a child can probably still be found on eBay.

The flip side of my fear about too much escapism into virtual reality and immersive gaming is that you, the consumer, have never had more options for entertainment. Thanks to computer graphics, there is really no great novel, comic book, historical era, or idea that would be impossible or too expensive to film.

As a creator — whether it's writing, the visual arts, music, filmmaking — you've never had an easier time bringing what you create to a vast audience. This doesn't guarantee that your work will *find* an audience, but the old gatekeepers separating you from your potential audience don't function in that role anymore. Self-published books can turn into big Hollywood movies.

The Internet and modern technology have eliminated a lot of those little annoyances of life from a generation ago. Need to find out where to go? Use the map app on your phone. Think about how much less frequently people get lost compared to before the Internet era.

I lamented Americans' excessive use of 911 on Wednesday, but let's face it — we're all probably safer knowing that at the site of any car accident, fire, or crime, somebody can dial 911 with their cell phone. Think about all the phone-recorded video that has exposed wrongdoing.

Do you need to fix something in your house? There's a good chance there's a YouTube video showing you how to do it. Did you lose the instruction manual for that so-called easy-to-assemble furniture? There's a good chance the manufacturer posted it online for download.

Your local supermarket probably has way more varieties of food, of better quality, than it did a generation ago. You can find six-packs from small breweries and craft beers in supermarkets now. You could go to a place like Total Wine and never run out of new options. If you have food allergies, or practice religious dietary restrictions, or are vegetarian or vegan, lactose intolerant or gluten-free, most restaurants understand and will try to accommodate you.

Think about how rarely you get stuck behind someone at the grocery line paying for everything with a check. Yes, your email inbox gets a lot of spam, but you have quicker access to more people than ever before and the important stuff is much less likely to get "lost in the mail." We gripe about Facebook, but now we know what happened to all of those old classmates, neighbors, and friends from earlier chapters of our lives.

Think about the many pictures you take now for which you don't have to buy and develop film.

Think about how much more you know about your health thanks to your FitBit or other wearable health-monitoring devices. Think about how many people are going to have their lives saved now that defibrillators are getting more common in public places.

Think about how many people don't die in car accidents, now that most cars on the road have airbags and crumple zones. Advances in steel allow engineers to design structures that can dissipate and redirect the force of the crash.

If, as Yuval Levin says, conservatism begins with gratitude for what is good and what works in our society and then striving to build on it, we can and should be thankful to be living in this moment, and in this society — even with all of its flaws and the daily screaming headlines of bad news.

Two Countries That Have a Bit of a Troubled History When They Team Up

A right-of-center foreign-policy analyst called my attention to this quote from Germany's foreign minister, Heiko Maas, during a speech in Tokyo a little more than a week ago:

"In this geopolitical situation we need Germany and Japan to close ranks," Maas said. "Alone, it will be tough for us to be a 'rule maker' in this multipolar world. When we combine our powers,

we can perhaps become something like a ‘rule shaper’ — designers and motors of the international order.”

Germany and Japan, getting back together and *combining their powers to design a new international order*. Gee, if only there was some sort of nifty nickname we could give this alliance, like they’re trying to get the world to spin on a new *axis* . . . If this guy starts talking about inviting Italy to the party, watch the skies over Hawaii.

Paraphrasing an old Dennis Miller joke, I look at a new Germany–Japan alliance the same way I look at a Hall & Oates reunion tour. I wasn’t a fan of their old work together, and I’m not all that eager to see the new stuff.

ADDENDA: Friday’s a good day to remind you to consider joining [NRPlus](#) — get full access to the entire NR archives, way fewer ads when you’re visiting the website, participate in the members-only Facebook group (which is probably at least 99.9 percent free of foreign intelligence services attempting to manipulate us with [images of Bernie Sanders as a bodybuilder](#)), and get early invitations and discounts to NR events.