



# The Unsung X-Factor That Could Upend The Next Presidential Election

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One, and only one, candidate, Barack Obama, caught the X-factor and improbably got himself nominated and elected, and re-elected, president. Another improbable candidate could catch it again.

What is that X-factor? How does it upend things?

Peace and personal security continued to flourish in 2014 and are likely to continue into 2015 and beyond. This is important news. It also is news the news media can ill afford to report. But voters sense it.

Two of our greatest public intellectuals, Steven Pinker and Andrew Mack, provide a defining “state of the world” summation in *Slate.com* in [The World Is Not Falling Apart](#). The evidence of peace is compelling.

Why is this not more widely reported? No sinister conspiracy of the Illuminati is afoot. No media cabal seeks to keep us in the dark or suppress the implications of this New World Order. Peace and harmony, supremely important for everything from politics to economics to the social order, simply proves supremely uninteresting to readers.

There is no drama in peace. Readers tune out.

The BBC earlier this month [reported](#) the near-catastrophic results of an experiment by a paper in southern Russia in reporting only good news for a day:

*The City Reporter*, based in Rostov-on-Don, says it lost two-thirds of its readers after deciding to publish only good news for just one day. “Do you feel like you are surrounded by negative

*information? You don't want to read the news in the morning?" the website had asked its readers. "Do you think good news is a myth? We'll try to prove the opposite tomorrow!" On 1 December, as promised, the website carried only positive headlines. ...*

*But as uplifting as they were intended to be, the good news stories sent readership numbers plummeting. "We looked for positives in the day's news, and we think we found them," [wrote deputy editor Viktoriya Nekrasova on Facebook](#). "But it looks like almost nobody needs them. That's the trouble." The following day, the City Reporter decided to return to more reliable staples: car crashes and burst water pipes.*

This is well rooted in human psychology. As Kahneman and Tversky demonstrated, people are more than twice as likely to engage in risk-avoidant than opportunity-seeking behavior. People tend toward vigilance toward threats, real and imagined.

The famous adage "the customer is always right" prevails. So peace largely is absent from the press. We pixel-stained scribes live to serve.

Still, tune in now if only for a moment. The future, after all, is at stake.

Pinker, Johnstone Family professor of psychology and Harvard and author of *Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, Mack, fellow at the One Earth Future Foundation and director of the Human Security Report Project at Simon Fraser University, bent the rules and, again, braved reader apathy, to considerable note:

*Newsreaders will always perceive that they live in dangerous times.*

*... Some categories of violence, like rampage shootings and terrorist attacks, are riveting dramas but (outside war zones) kill relatively small numbers of people. Every day ordinary homicides claim one and a half times as many Americans as the number who died in the Sandy Hook massacre. And as the political scientist [John Mueller points out](#), in most years bee stings, deer collisions, ignition of nightwear, and other mundane accidents kill more Americans than terrorist attacks.*

And then they proceed to recount the true state of the world.

Homicide. Worldwide, about five to 10 times as many people die in police-blatter homicides as die in wars. And in most of the world, the rate of homicide has been sinking.

Violence Against Women. The intense media coverage of famous athletes who have assaulted their wives or girlfriends, and of episodes of rape on college campuses, have suggested to many pundits that we are undergoing a surge of violence against women. But the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics' victimization surveys (which circumvent the problem of underreporting to the police) show the opposite: Rates of rape or sexual assault and of violence against intimate partners have been sinking for decades, and are now a quarter or less of their peaks in the past.

Violence Against Children. ... *Kids are undoubtedly safer than they were in the past. In a [review](#) of the literature on violence against children in the United States published earlier this year, the sociologist David Finkelhor and his colleagues reported, “Of 50 trends in exposure examined, there were 27 significant declines and no significant increases between 2003 and 2011.*

Democratization. ... *[T]he democracy craze has decelerated of late but shows no signs of going into reverse. ... A majority of the world’s countries today are democratic, and not just the wealthy monocultures of Europe, North America, and East Asia. Governments that are more democratic than not ... are entrenched (albeit with nerve-wracking ups and downs) in most of Latin America, in floridly multiethnic India, in Islamic Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and in 14 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Even the autocracies of Russia and China, which show few signs of liberalizing anytime soon, are incomparably less repressive than the regimes of Stalin, Brezhnev, and Mao.*

Genocide and Other Mass Killings of Civilians. ... *By any standard, the world is nowhere near as genocidal as it was during its peak in the 1940s, when Nazi, Soviet, and Japanese mass murders, together with the targeting of civilians by all sides in World War II, resulted in a civilian death rate in the vicinity of 350 per 100,000 per year. Stalin and Mao kept the global rate between 75 and 150 through the early 1960s, and it has been falling ever since, though punctuated by spikes of dying ....*

War. ... *In a historically unprecedented development, the number of interstate wars has plummeted since 1945, and the most destructive kind of war, in which great powers or developed states fight each other, has vanished altogether. ... Though the recent increase in civil wars and battle deaths is real and worrisome, it must be kept in perspective. It has undone the progress of the last dozen years, but the rates of violence are still well below those of the 1990s, and nowhere near the levels of the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, or 1980s.*

Cato Institute’s Christopher A. Preble and John Mueller recently made complementary points in their important work, [A Dangerous World?](#), a compilation of papers from Cato Institute’s Dangerous World Conference. The reality, it happens, is very different from the perception. And notwithstanding the hyperventilation of various policy elites, as Abraham Lincoln once noted, “you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” This matters politically.

The consistent trend of the efflorescence of peace and personal security makes for boring journalism. Yet it provides a potent electoral opportunity. An empirically safer, more democratic, world is one in which America may safely — and even beneficially for national and world security, as well as for equitable prosperity — stand down from hyperpower to superpower status.

Such a world also is one in which we can well afford to undertake what Sen. Rand Paul called the “demilitarization” of our police. Moreover the welfare state that inevitably grew in the shadow of the warfare state is ripe, equally, for retirement. The federal budget is ripe for cutting across-the-board. The emergence of peace, security, and dignity deals, potentially, a wild card into the 2016 presidential race.

Barack Obama won his party's 2008 presidential nomination from a much more experienced, much better known, better financed, but more hawkish, opponent. He then won election and reelection against more substantial, but more hawkish, Republican nominees. Obama won on a promise, largely (if sloppily) fulfilled, of returning America's troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and moving America toward a peacetime footing.

Obama misread his mandate to extend to his cherished progressive desiderata (on which he did not materially campaign) thereby greatly diminishing his popularity and staining his legacy. Yet he promised, and proved, to be a peace president. Obama will go down in history, above all, for peace, not for his clumsy efforts to expand social democracy.

Presidential aspirants have an opportunity to campaign on the implications of the emerging trend of peace, personal security, representative democracy, increasing world prosperity (world GDP having, nominally, quintupled over the past two generations, bringing over a billion souls out of abject poverty), and human dignity.

The new reality remains a political orphan. Yet the electorate senses this transformation. Peace offers a winning political narrative.

Reporting good news makes for terrible journalism. Yet an electoral crusade founded on the promise to help secure a golden age of world peace, equitable prosperity, and human dignity is that for which voters yearn. The political consequences of the peace, if any presidential candidate firmly grasps the opportunity to confront the attendant opportunities, dramatically could upend the 2016 presidential contest. The X-Factor is peace.