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It's better than you think

Away from the shocking headlines, progress is improving human life

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It is the worst of times — well no, not really. This past week we had shootings of police and shootings by police. The world economy and political situation is a mess. It is a time of crisis — without an apparent Churchill, Thatcher or Reagan. Yet, in many ways, things have never been better.

In 1930, 304 American police officers were killed in the line of duty; last year it was 122. In 1930, the U.S. population was a little over one third of what it is today, so, on a population adjusted basis, there were about seven times as many policemen being killed per year 85 years ago compared to recent years. And police killing of others, including black men, has also fallen sharply.

As perverse as it might seem, there was an item of good news in the shootings of police in Dallas, and that is that the killer was taken out by a robot — perhaps saving the lives of other police officers. Over the next couple of decades, advanced robots will take over many of the most dangerous aspects of policing. For instance, when a police officer stops a car for a traffic violation, he or she typically gets out of the police car and walks over to the car of the person to be questioned — despite the danger of on-rushing traffic. In the future, robots will take over the function of obtaining the driver's license, car registration, and looking into the pulled-over car while the police officer does the questioning from the safety of his or her car. Robot technology, combined with the self-driving car, will greatly reduce confrontations between police officers and citizens — saving lives and reducing mutual frustration.

It is not hard to argue that mankind has made very little progress in governance over the last 2,500 years, leading to endless wars and other conflicts, and unnecessarily erratic economic performance or worse. But at the same time, enormous progress has occurred in science and technology, making life better for all of us. The events of last week showed that more progress in race relations is needed but, in the same week, very talented and dedicated individuals were able to place a spacecraft in an orbit around Jupiter — no mean feat.

Despite a few mass shootings, homicide rates in the United States have been falling for decades and currently are about half what they were 50 years ago. You have about three times the chance of being killed by lightning than you do in a mass shooting — this, despite soaring gun ownership in America.

If you are feeling pessimistic about the state of mankind, there is a wonderful website — HumanProgress.org — maintained by the Cato Institute's Marian Tupy and Chelsea Follett. The site documents the progress human beings have made and provides new examples each week of the advances. Most everything we buy becomes less expensive and better over time. A few decades ago, the doomsayers claimed that we were going to run out of many commodities, like oil. The fact is that most commodity prices, in real terms, are near record lows, and proven global oil reserves have never been higher.

Many improvements, and particularly new products and innovations, are not fully captured in the economic statistics, which means that the real improvements in well-being are underreported. Thirty years ago, no one had a cellphone — now 97 percent of all adult Americans do. Billions around the world, particularly in poor countries, now have cell phones, enabling them to communicate at a distance for the first time.

If you fly over the northeastern part of the United States, you will notice it is primarily woodland (filled with deer, coyotes and even bears). A century ago it was largely cropland. What happened? Enormous advances in food science have enabled mankind to grow far more and better food in far less space. GMOs (genetically-modified organisms) in particular have greatly increased crop yields and made food more nutritious by adding vitamins while reducing the need for fertilizer and pesticides. As recently as three decades ago, there were people with credentials who claimed that mankind was doomed to mass starvation because population growth would outrun the ability to produce more food — yet just the opposite has happened. The doomsayers now claim, with zero evidence, that GMOs are dangerous. If the opponents of GMOs had their way, we would go back to a world of billions of malnourished children and the old specter of famine.

Every generation has those who say the end of the world is close — often religious figures, fortune tellers and wayward scientists. As an economist, I predict that the continuous debt buildup by most of the world's governments is unsustainable and a painful readjustment must take place — but this will not be the end of the world.

And finally, one item of very good news is that the climate alarmists have been wrong. Their predictions of big rises in sea levels, the end of Arctic sea ice, and the end of polar bears, which were also supposed to have occurred by now, didn't happen. Yes, the climate changes slowly over time — but almost all plants, animals and, particularly, humans adapt as they have for tens of thousands of years.