

NATIONAL REVIEW

Apocalypse: Not Now

You wouldn't know it from the headlines, but most things are good and getting better.

By Michael Tanner
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Much of politics these days is conducted in apocalyptic tones. If President Obama isn't stopped, we will be living in a cross between the old Soviet Union and a 13th-century caliphate. The Republican midterm victory means we are on the short road to a Margaret Atwood novel. America — indeed, the world — is teetering on the edge of the abyss. Insert your scary scenario here.

The truth, however, is that this is a great time to be alive. New problems are always cropping up, but most things are good and getting better.

Take crime, for example. Public perception is that crime is a serious problem in this country and getting worse. But that's not true. According to the FBI, the rate of violent crime has declined from 387 incidents per 100,000 people in 1993 to just 47 incidents per 100,000 people in 2012 (the last year for which full data have been released). Major violent crimes are down significantly: The homicide rate has fallen by 51 percent, robberies are down 56 percent, and aggravated assault has dropped by 45 percent.

On the wider world stage, we are worried about war and terrorism. No doubt the rise of ISIS, an increasingly aggressive Russia, and other problems are cause for concern. But, by most measures, the world is a far more peaceful place than it has been throughout most of human history. Your odds of dying in a terrorist attack next year are roughly 20 million to one. You are more likely to die from tripping over your living-room furniture.

Even with the recent increase in fighting in Syria and Iraq, there have been fewer war-related deaths worldwide over the last ten years than during any decade since before World War II. According to Stephen Pinker, author of [*The Better Angels of Our Nature*](#), "Today we may be living in the most peaceable era in the existence of our species." Only a few hundredths of a percentage point of the world's population died in the past decade as a result of war, terrorism, genocide, or militia action. While every violent death is a tragedy, compare that figure to the hundreds of millions who died in 20th-century conflicts and persecution.

Both liberals and conservatives complain about the American health-care system, albeit for different reasons. But we continue to live longer and healthier lives. A girl born today can expect to live until age 81, a boy until age 76. The benefits also extend to those of us who are already

older. A 65-year-old today is likely to live another 19 years. Age-adjusted death rates from cancer are down 16 percent since 1999; from heart disease, down 35 percent; from flu and pneumonia, down 33 percent. The infant-mortality rate is half what it was in 1980.

As a matter of fact, life expectancies are increasing worldwide. A decade ago, the average life expectancy in Africa was 50. Today, it has risen to 55. Globally, infant mortality has decreased by 49 percent since 1990. AIDS deaths have been cut in half in the last decade, and malaria deaths are down 20 percent.

The U.S. economy and the world economy have certainly struggled in recent years. Yet, both as individuals and as a society, we are richer than we were even a short time ago. Consider that as recently as 1970, 17.5 percent of American households were without fully functioning plumbing; today, just 2 percent are. Extreme malnutrition has been all but eliminated in this country, and the destitution of material poverty has been significantly reduced.

For the middle class, too, our material circumstances have improved measurably.

We continue to outproduce the rest of the world. Take manufacturing, for example. We worry that American manufacturing is in decline. But, in reality, manufacturing output is the highest it has ever been — in fact, it is higher than pre-recession levels.

If you are black or Latino, a woman or a gay, things may still not be perfect, but you have more freedom and wider opportunities than at any other time in our nation's history. Racism, sexism, and homophobia have certainly not disappeared, but they are less accepted in society than ever before. Although episodes like Ferguson highlight continued racial divisions, surveys show that Americans today are more tolerant and devoted to an integrated and diverse society. As Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo has noted, "A nation once comfortable as a deliberately segregationist and racially discriminatory society has not only abandoned that view, but now overtly positively endorses the goals of racial integration and equal treatment. . . . The magnitude, steadiness, and breadth of this change should be lost on no one."

We should not allow temporary setbacks or the heat of political debate to obscure the progress we have made. When you think about it, is there really a time in U.S. or world history that you would rather have lived?

None of this is to suggest that we don't still face major challenges in this country. And the policy choices we make matter in terms of meeting them. The price of liberty, after all is eternal vigilance.

Yet, as we sit down to our Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow, we should keep in mind that we really do have a great deal to be thankful for. So, hold the dystopian rhetoric . . . and pass the turkey.

— *Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the [Cato Institute](#) and the author of [Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution](#).*