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1 – THE WORLD IS NOT FALLING APART

The world is not falling apart. The kinds of violence to which most people are vulnerable – homicide, rape, battering, child abuse – have been in steady decline in most of the world. Autocracy is giving way to democracy. Wars between states – by far the most destructive of all conflicts – are all but obsolete. The increase in the number and deadliness of civil wars since 2010 is circumscribed, puny in comparison with the decline that preceded it, and unlikely to escalate.

So write Steven Pinker and Andrew Mack at Slate.com.

We have been told of impending doom before, the authors remind us: a Soviet invasion of Western Europe, a line of dominoes in Southeast Asia, revanchism in a reunified Germany, a rising sun in Japan, cities overrun by teenage superpredators, a coming anarchy that would fracture the major nation-states, and weekly 9/11-scale attacks that would pose an existential threat to civilization.

Why is it always said that the world is “more dangerous than it has ever been” – even as a greater and greater majority of humanity lives in peace and dies of old age? Because, according to Pinker

and Mack, too much of our impression of the world comes from a misleading formula of journalistic narration. That is, reporters, experts, activists, talking heads and columnists, by constantly (and exclusively) turning our attention to “crises,” give us the wrong impression of reality.

There is a better way to understand the world than digesting a constant stream of bad news, write Pinker and Mack: by recounting the events of the recent past that put the events of the present in an intelligible context. This would include consulting analyses of quantitative datasets that are now easily accessible online.

An evidence-based mindset on the state of the world would bring many benefits, the authors conclude. It would calibrate our national and international responses to the magnitude of the dangers that face us. It would limit the influence of terrorists, school shooters, decapitation cinematographers, and other violence impresarios. It might even dispel foreboding and embody, again, the hope of the world.

[Roger: It might also be asking too much.]

2 – LABOR MARKET DROPOUTS STAY ON THE SIDELINES

A US economy that suddenly looks healthy – 50 straight months of job gains, best quarter of growth in 11 years – is falling short in a key area.

It isn't luring back many of the millions who dropped out of the labor market during the down

times. As Josh Zumbrun writes in The Wall Street Journal, that failing nags at many economists (including yours truly).

Federal Reserve Chairwoman Janet Yellen has cited the low labor-force participation rate in justifying

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the Fed's long easy-money quest to stimulate the economy and boost wages. As Zumbrun reminds us, a more buoyant economy and tightening labor market were supposed to draw in those now sitting on the margins. But the probability of a worker re-entering the labor force continues to slump.

Over the past three months, an average of only 6.8% of those outside the labor force either found a job or began looking for one. That means people are entering the labor force at the lowest pace in records kept since 1990, down from more than 8% in 2010. So even as the labor market has strengthened, the chance that a jobless worker will ever return to the workforce has decreased.

Every month, millions of workers leave the job market because of retirement, to care for children or aging parents, to pursue more education, or out of discouragement. Millions of others jump in after graduating, or finding jobs that entice them to re-enter. If a strengthening economy prompted enough workers to return, the entrances could begin to outweigh exits. So far, that isn't happening.

In December 2007, the month the recession started, 66% of the working-age population either had a job or was looking for one. That share fell during the recession and has continued dropping ever since. In September, participation dropped to 62.7%, the lowest since 1978, and remains near that level. Some decline in the labor force was expected as the massive baby-boom generation born after World War II began turning 60 and retiring by the millions, in the mid-2000s. Few retirees return to jobs. Around 18% of those over age 65 are in the workforce.

3 – THE UNPREDICTABLE FUTURE

I endorse the following excerpted essay by Richard Eberling at epictimes.com:

As a new year begins, it is easy to consider that the prospects for freedom in America and in many

The decline in boomer participation isn't the sole reason behind the decline, writes Zumbrun. Another big explanation could be that people who drop out amid a bad economy can't easily be enticed back. Economists call this labor-market scarring. People find other ways to get through life, even precariously, by relying on friends and family, going on disability or retiring early.

Determining the cause and finding solutions for depressed participation has important implications. The size of the workforce is a key determinant of how fast the economy can grow. A smaller workforce presents a drag to growth. With fewer workers paying taxes, the government's fiscal picture is more challenging. In the late 1990s, when the US last ran budget surpluses, the participation rate was nearly five percentage points higher than today.

In recent years, Fed officials had cited the declining labor force as evidence of economic slack. The traditional unemployment rate counts only those actively looking for work; those who stop looking entirely are counted as labor-force dropouts. The Fed pressed on with easy-money stimulus efforts, citing the belief that the jobless rate, while declining, understated the true extent of economic weakness.

And yet, while the unemployment rate has fallen, the economy has added jobs, and consumer sentiment has improved, the flow into the labor force has declined. In other words, the Fed has done all it can to increase workforce participation, and it hasn't worked.

other parts of the world to seem dim. After all, government continues to grow bigger and more intrusive, along with tax burdens that siphon off vast amounts of private wealth. Extrapolating

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these trends out for the foreseeable future, it would seem that the chances for winning liberty are highly unlikely. There is only one problem with this pessimistic forecast: the future is unpredictable and apparent trends do change. ...

WE CANNOT PREDICT TOMORROW'S KNOWLEDGE TODAY

Our inescapably imperfect knowledge means we can never predict our own future. If we could predict tomorrow's knowledge and its potentials, then we would already know everything today – and we would know we knew it! This applies to social, political, and economic trends as well. Most people in 1900 expected the twentieth century to be an epoch of growing international peace and harmony. But, instead, in 1914, there began the First World War, that went on for four years, took the lives of at least 20 million soldiers, and cost (in 2014 dollars) over \$3 trillion. And the relatively classical liberal and free market world that prevailed before the “Great War” was shattered.

The twentieth century, as a whole, was the bloodiest and most destructive in modern history due to the rise of political and economic collectivism, in the forms of socialism, communism, fascism, Nazism and the interventionist-welfare state. The conflicts that collectivism brought in its wake have cost possibly 250 million lives over the last one hundred years. No one anticipated this turn of events in 1900.

THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF FUTURE POLITICAL-ECONOMIC TRENDS

Which of us really expected to see the end of the USSR in our lifetimes, without either a nuclear cataclysm or a devastating and bloody civil war? In the mid-1980s the often perceptive French social critic Jean-François Revel published *How Democracies Perish*, in which he expressed his fear that the loss of moral and ideological commitment to freedom by intellectuals and many other people in the West meant that the global triumph of communism under Soviet leadership was a strong

possibility. Instead it was Soviet communism that disappeared from the map of the globe.

Who in January 1990 anticipated that Saddam Hussein would invade Kuwait in August of that year, setting in motion a chain of events that resulted in two American invasions and a ten-year occupation of Iraq? Who in 2000 would have anticipated that Bill Clinton's eight years in office would seem, in retrospect, an era of restrained government compared to the explosion in government spending and intervention during the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations?

HISTORICAL CHRONOLOGY DOES NOT MEAN FUTURE CAUSALITY

And who today knows what the whole twenty-first century holds for us? Let me suggest that the answer is: nobody. ...

The decades of relative global peace and market-based prosperity that preceded 1914 did not mean that war and destruction were impossible for the rest of the twentieth century. The ascendancy of Soviet communism, Italian fascism, and German Nazism in 1920s, 1930s and 1940s did not mean that freedom and democracy had reached their end, though the books and articles of some of the most insightful advocates of individual liberty and limited government in the years between the two World Wars carried the despair and fear that totalitarianism was the inescapable wave of the future.

The persistent and current growth in government intervention and the welfare state does not mean that a return to the classical-liberal ideas of individual liberty, free markets, and limited government is a pipe dream of the past.

HUMAN EVENTS ARE THE RESULT OF HUMAN ACTION

Human events are the result of human action. Our actions are an outgrowth of our ideas and our will

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and willingness to try to implement them. The stranglehold of Big Government will persist only for as long as we allow it, for as long as we accept the arguments of our ideological opponents that the interventionist welfare state is “inevitable” and “irreversible.”

That is, the present trend will continue only for as long as we accept that the chronologically observed increase in government power over the last decades is somehow causally determined and inescapable in the stream of human affairs.

This could have been equally said about human slavery. Few institutions were so imbedded in the human circumstance throughout recorded history as the ownership of some men by others. Surely it was a pipe dream to suggest that all men should be free and equal before the law.

Yet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a new political ideal was born that declared that all men are created equal and endowed with certain unalienable individual rights to life, liberty and honestly acquired property, which no other mortals could take away. So slavery, which Aristotle considered to be the natural condition of some men, was brought to an end before the close of the nineteenth century through the power of ideas and human purpose.

In the 1700s, mercantilism – the eighteenth-century version of central planning – was considered both necessary and desirable for national prosperity. Even Adam Smith, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), believed that its hold over men’s minds and actions was too powerful to ever permit the triumph of free trade. Yet in one lifetime following Adam Smith’s death in 1790, freedom of trade and enterprise was established in Great Britain and the United States, and then slowly but surely through much of the rest of the world.

This was all made possible because of the rise

and partial triumph of a political philosophy of individual rights that argued for the banishment of violence and oppression in the relationships among men.

LIBERTY’S WINNING IDEAS ARE OUT THERE

We cannot imagine, today, how freedom will successfully prevail over our current paternalistic governments, any more than many people could imagine in 1940 a world without German Nazism and Soviet communism, or FDR’s New Deal. But that does not mean it’s impossible.

Precisely because the future is unknown, we may be confident that trends can and will change, just as they have in the past. We cannot fully know today what arguments friends of freedom will imagine and successfully articulate tomorrow to end government control of our lives. But those arguments are out there, waiting to be better formulated and presented, just as earlier friends of freedom succeeded in making the cases against slavery and mercantilism.

There is one thing, therefore, that we can predict: patience, persistence, and belief in the power of ideas and a well articulated defense of individual rights and free markets will provide the best chance we have to achieve the free society many of us so much desire.

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