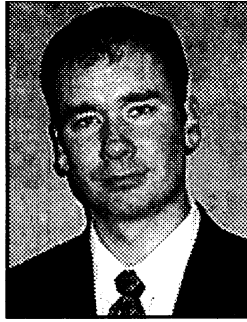




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Doom-and-gloom rhetoric falls short of reality



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My daughter has been learning recently about reality. Specifically, how important it is not to shade it if you expect to be taken seriously. The stories of the “little boy who cried wolf” and “Chicken Little” have been told ad nauseam.

Maybe adults need to be reading those, as well.

Popular political rhetoric would have us believe America is teetering on the brink of a second Dark Age. The signs seemingly abound: from health care to education, these are dreadful times, we’re

told, to be alive.

But are they?

A recent article at TechCentralStation.com by economist Arnold Kling offers a stunning reminder that things have never been so good. Even a modest comparison of life today to life in 1970 demonstrates the advances our culture has made — often despite the meddling of politicians convinced of their own omniscience.

In 1970, 17 percent of the population didn’t have a refrigerator. According to the US Census in 2000 and other federal government data, today less than one percent of the population lacks one. In 2000, less than five percent of teenagers owned cell phones. Three years later, 56 percent have them. No one but the super-rich owned one before about 1990.

In 1970, no one owned a microwave. But today, 75 percent of the poor households have one. Same thing for VCRs.

Could it be our phenomenal cultural prosperity has bred something akin to survivors’ guilt? We collectively look back at the struggles of history, subconsciously realize we’ve inherited a system of liberty and wealth beyond imagination, and created a form of doomsday panic to justify our existence.

With too many politicians willing to capitalize on this collective guilt, rhetorical fuel is added to emotional fires. With meaningless smoke obscuring reality, the politico is positioned as the heroic savior.

The truth of the matter is we don’t need them to save us.

Kling, citing work by Nobel laureate Robert Fogel, examines the sheer amount of leisure time available to us. Assuming a 365-day work year, American males worked 8.5 hours a day in 1880. Today, the average American works something like 4.7 hours a day — again, assuming a 365-day work-year. Our leisure time has increased from less than two hours a day in 1880, to almost six hours a day now.

Statistics compiled for a UC-Berkley course in the “Physiology of the Aging Process” notes that in 1900, American men lived to 45, women to 48. Just 90 years later, men were living to 73 and women to 78.





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Political busybodies including myself, at times, too often see the overflowing cup of American waters, noting only tiny imperfections in the glass. Why? Because the threat of an impending crisis fuels passions, motivates voters and drives donations.

At the same time, legions of bureaucrats further the crisis myths in rational attempts to justify their employment. If there is no crisis, then there is no need for their service.

Explaining, for example, why bureaucrats cry the loudest against demands for strict accounting of government health care programs. When people who can provide for their own needs are required to, the bureaucrat is endangered.

The free market has given us prosperity unequalled in the annals of history; we are so wealthy our poorest children's health problems are not the plague, measles or pneumonia, but obesity and depression.

It's okay to worry about children lacking health insurance, but must we by default seek government solutions? Doing so requires we set aside the reality that government policy created the insurance problem in the first place through the misguided tax policies of the 1940s, and has been complicit in the escalating cost of medicine ever since.

We are so accustomed to government "solutions" we cannot comprehend a world where families are freed from government welfare programs.

My daughter knows "crying wolf" only paves the way for the real wolf to attack unnoticed. She knows efforts to hold up a falling sky means great effort is wasted in useless tasks.

There is certainly much work to be done, for the landscape of economic and political liberty has infinite room for development. Instead of feeling guilty about our prosperity, let's engage in behaviors proven to promote and preserve it for generations to come. The glass isn't half-empty, it's overflowing.

Michael Quinn Sullivan is vice president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, based in Austin.

