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The best of times

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Do you think things are getting better or worse around the world? Objectively, there is a correct answer, and that is unambiguously -- *better*.

No matter how you measure it — economic growth, life expectancy, childhood mortality, democratic countries, economic freedom, literacy, tax rates, crime rates, etc. — things are improving for most people in most places; and, in fact, they have never been better.

There are always pessimists, and one can always find things to be pessimistic about: "Will bird flu cause millions of human deaths?" The news media survive on bad news and fear.

That so much time and coverage is given to individual tragedies, e.g., the Scott Peterson and Michael Jackson trials, the Terry Schiavo case, and the pope's passing, or frivolous events (e.g., Prince Charles' new wedding) tells us the world is in very good shape. The news media are not spending time covering thousands of deaths from countries in combat, mass famine, labor strikes, or mass unemployment because those stories are largely not there — which is good news.

Perhaps the most underreported story of recent years has been the global surge in economic growth and reduced global poverty. The 25 largest developing countries, accounting for roughly half the world's population, all have good economic growth averaging almost 6 percent during the last year.

The two largest countries, China and India, accounting for about a third of the world's population, have grown rapidly since they each began moving away from a socialist to a free-market economy. China has been growing at an astounding rate of more than 9 percent per year, which means its GDP is doubling about every eight years.

At current rates of global economic growth, well more than half of the world's population will have a U.S. middle class standard of living or higher within 50 years.

For the first time in human history, it is hard to find a country that does not have positive economic growth. Even most of the African countries are now doing better, both because of higher commodity prices and better economic policies.

The world's largest economy, the United States, has had a higher economic growth rate over the last three decades than anytime in its history. Since the Reagan revolution, the path of rapid economic growth in the U.S. economy has been marred by only two very short and shallow recessions (in 1990 and 2001). Among the major economies, only Japan, Germany and France are performing poorly, with very low growth, due to excessive government taxation, spending and regulation, all of which can be corrected.

Thirty years ago, pessimists said the world was headed for mass starvation as a result of rapid population growth and falling food production. The reality has been just the opposite. Population growth is falling virtually everywhere. In fact, now depopulation seems a greater worry than overpopulation.

Global food production is far in excess of what is needed for everyone on the planet. The relatively few cases where people do not have enough to eat are almost due to incompetent, corrupt and criminal governments.

In the last 50 years, global life expectancy at birth has jumped from an average of only 46 years to the current 75 years. In the highly developed countries, it is now passing 80 years for women. Global infant mortality has dropped from 156 per 1,000 live births 50 years ago to 57. Literacy is rising rapidly everywhere. The Internet and cell phone technology are making it possible for most of the world's population to have available at almost any time all the information and stock of knowledge accumulated by mankind.

Finally, Freedom House says the number of free countries has risen from 44 (29 percent) in 1973 to 88 (46 percent) in 2003, and the number of countries that are not free has fallen from 65 (43 percent) in 1973 to 49 (25 percent) in 2003.

Partially free countries have remained at about 29 percent. Since 2003, Afghanistan and Iraq have also become free and democratic. The world percentage of electoral democracies has risen from only 40 percent in 1988 to more than 60 percent.

Yes, there are real dangers — terrorism, new diseases, and the growth of the international bureaucratic state, which would tax and regulate us all into poverty and servitude. However, the challenges we now face are minor compared to the risk of mass nuclear annihilation which was a very real possibility during the Cold War. We now know what we need to do to bring peace and prosperity to almost every individual on the globe: Push for democratic regimes that protect private property and individual liberties, provide free markets and have low government taxation, spending and regulation.

We are closer to this global ideal than ever. It can be achieved within the next 50 years, provided those who know what needs to be done devote the energy and resources to bring it about.

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