



## Most Things Are Better Now

by Richard W. Rahn

### THE GOOD OLD DAYS WERE NOT SO GOOD FOR MOST PEOPLE

If you think things are bad, you might be consoled in knowing that most things for most people on the globe were never better than in 2013.

The good news is that most people are living longer with more real income and more security than they did a year ago, a decade ago, or at any time in history. Global personal safety is at a record high. The number of people killed in wars last year was at most a few thousand — a tragedy, but only for a minuscule portion of the world’s population — unlike the tens of millions killed per year during the world wars of the last century. Violent crime and murder rates are declining almost everywhere in the world.

Life expectancy is highly correlated with economic well-being and the quality of medical care. Global poverty is diminishing at a very rapid rate, and very few now starve to death, but when they do, it is almost always caused by incompetent or venal governments. It is estimated that average inflation-adjusted

global per-capita income was only \$712 in 1820, but now is about \$8,000 per year, a more than tenfold increase.

Average global life expectancy, which is now 68 years, hovered around age 30 from the beginning of recorded time until about 1900. The United States was relatively rich by 1900, but even so, women often died in childbirth, and there were no modern medicines and antibiotics to treat infections and other diseases. Many occupations were dangerous, and men were frequently disabled or died in industrial accidents. Mass epidemics were common, such as the famous influenza epidemic of 1918 that killed millions. Travel was inconvenient, slow and dangerous. Those who managed to live through childhood could often expect to live to their 60s, but maladies that come with aging and are now successfully treated were death sentences then.

If things are really getting better, which they are, then why so much pessimism? The scientist and writer Matt Ridley explained it well in his book “The Rational Optimist”:

“The airwaves are crammed with doom. In my own adult lifetime, I have listened to implacable predictions of growing poverty, coming famines, expanding deserts, imminent plagues, impending water wars, inevitable oil exhaustion, mineral shortages, falling sperm counts, thinning ozone, acidifying rain, nuclear winters, mad-cow epidemics, Y2K computer bugs, killer bees, sex-change fish, global warming, ocean acidification and even asteroid impacts that would presently bring this happy interlude to a terrible end. I cannot recall a time when one or other of these scares was not solemnly espoused by sober, distinguished and serious elites and hysterically echoed by the media. I cannot recall a time when I was not being urged by somebody that the world could only survive if it abandoned the foolish goal of economic growth. The fashionable reason for pessimism changed, but the pessimism was constant.”

It is no surprise that newspapers and their electronic equivalents hype bad news and scares — because they sell. Al Gore made headlines when he told us in 2007 that

the Arctic Ocean sea ice would be gone by 2013. Oops. The Arctic ice sheet actually grew by 29 percent in 2013, and the Antarctic ice sheet now covers more ocean surface than since measurements began. The global-warming crowd is still inventing excuses as to why none of their models failed to forecast the fact that the world has not warmed for the past 17 years. This year was supposed to be a very active year for Atlantic hurricanes, particularly destructive ones hitting the U.S. coast — which got big headlines. However, you may have noticed that there were only two small, short-lived hurricanes far out in the Atlantic that never got close to the coast. This year was also supposed to be a big year for tornadoes, but again, thankfully, they were near a record low.

The fact is, despite Obamacare and the Federal Reserve, most Americans did live a little bit better in 2013. The world economy grew faster than the American economy, which means most people’s lives improved, particularly for those who live in the high-growth economies of Southeast Asia.

To bring a better balance about the real state of mankind, the Cato Institute has created a new website: HumanProgress.org, under the direction of Marian Tupy. The website is a tool for understanding what institutions, policies and forces have caused, or are impediments, to human progress. It will be no surprise when you look at what has been happening that most of the advances were made by private institutions and individuals, and most of the problems have been caused by governments.

Finally, researchers at Harvard Medical School last week reported the really good news that they have “discovered a cause of aging in mammals that may be reversible.”

*Richard W. Rahn is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and chairman of the Institute for Global Economic Growth.*

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/dec/23/rahn-most-things-are-better-now/>

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