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Last Word: A Cure for the “Everything Sucks” Epidemic

By Marian L. Tupy

As if the COVID-19 pandemic and the concomitant screwups by the US government were not enough to make one despair about the future of America, a curious new virus is spreading across the fruited plains. The “everything sucks” epidemic has infected parts of the right, which dropped Ronald Reagan’s “shining city upon a hill” vision of the United States in favor of the, I kid you not, theocracy and feudalism of the Middle Ages. Meanwhile, the virus has further compromised the already weakened cognition of the far left, which is now openly trying to resuscitate the 100-percent-failure-rate socialism that scarred much of the globe during the last century.

This negativity emotion contagion, as George Mason University economist Tyler Cowen and I agreed in a recent podcast (you really should subscribe to Human Progress), is likely driven by America’s hypercompetitive media landscape, which battles for eyeballs by focusing on the bad news and putting the worst spin on it. “If it bleeds, it leads,” goes the journalistic saying, and true to form, the emotional valence of the news, research shows, has been growing darker since 1945.

Blaming the media is often deserved, as well as pleasant and easy. It is also trite. The problem goes much deeper, for it rests in our innate propensity to overindulge on bad news. Prioritization of threats made a lot of sense when our hunter-gathering ancestors chased the mastodon while being chased by hungry lions and headhunters from enemy tribes, often at the same time. It makes little sense now that we live in the most prosperous and peaceful society on which the sun ever cast its rays. Alas, our modern skulls house Stone Age minds, as evolutionary psychologists remind us.

(Thankfully, we have just hired one of them, Adam Omary, a Harvard PhD no less, to help us figure these things out.)

There are at least two problems with the new virus. The first is that the “everything sucks” America is often disconnected from the facts that are easily obtainable to anyone interested in, you know, reality. US life expectancy is at an all-time high. The same is true of the real—which is to say, inflation-adjusted—median personal income. Recent inflation has eroded some of our purchasing power, but the long-term trend, as shown in the American Abundance Index that Cato adjunct scholar Gale Pooley and I launched in January, points to continued growth in affordability.

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The country has its problems. Few people trust in America’s governing institutions, but that is unlikely to improve if, per Tucker Carlson’s and Curtis Yarvin’s suggestion, we return to having an absolute monarch. Housing, the new construction of which is inhibited by regulations, and higher education and health care costs, which are elevated by subsidies, are unlikely to

become more affordable if New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani and his ilk get their way. Put differently, the fixes for America’s ills offered by right-wing and left-wing reactionaries have been tried and tested and were found wanting.

The second problem is that an “everything sucks” attitude could easily turn into a “burn it all down” approach, as exemplified by such fringe groups as antifa on the left and the Proud Boys on the right. Ignorance of history, the degree of which is staggering given our ability to access almost all human knowledge via supercomputers in our pockets, makes far too many Americans think that out of the ashes of the old and imperfect regime something better must emerge, phoenix-like. That’s just silly. The American Revolution was unique in its success. The French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Iranian Revolutions were much more normal in their failure.

As classical liberals and libertarians, we understand that no political or economic system is perfect. “Out of the crooked timber of humanity,” Immanuel Kant wrote, “no straight thing was ever made.” That said, let us not be disheartened. America has seen much darker days in the past, and the country’s capacity for course correction and regeneration is unparalleled. With your help, we will continue in our mission of promoting changes that will, if implemented, make the next 250 years of American history even better than the last quarter of a millennium, crooked timber and all. ♦

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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