

## There's No Time Like the Present

by Michael Hanlon

The world is, we are told day after day, week after week, going to hell in a handcart. After the most brutal, catastrophic, and inhuman century in history, the new millennium has kicked off in the way it clearly intends to go on. War, famine, and pestilence stalk the savannahs and forests of Africa. The Middle East is turning into a charnel house. And the planet itself is under a human onslaught the likes of which we have never seen before.

Every day, it seems, there is new and ever-more persuasive evidence that the age of doom, if not quite upon us, must surely be very near. Just recently we learned that the North Atlantic's population of seabirds was under grave threat: global warming was heating the sea and killing off their fish prey. *The Day after Tomorrow*, a profoundly silly disaster movie, managed to get itself splattered over the august pages of *Nature*, *Science*, and *New Scientist*—thanks entirely to the fact that it dealt with global warming, enemy not only of seabirds but of clear thinking. Common wisdom says the 20th century was the worst in history. Think of Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot—the “Great Bastards of History” as Clive James once memorably called them—the African famines, Hiroshima, Chernobyl. And, most people seem to think, the 21st is likely to be more unpleasant still, getting off to a spectacular start just eight months and ten days after it began.

The doom extends across the political spectrum. The Right points to our inexorable moral decay, promiscuity, the ravages of AIDS and drug addiction, the decline in manners and standards. The Green Left berates us for our profligacy with resources, our rape of the environment, our failure to right the inequalities of wealth that are leading us to meltdown.

*Michael Hanlon is the science editor of London's Daily Mail. This article originally appeared in London's Spectator.*



Reps. Pat Toomey, Sam Johnson, and Jeff Flake, lead sponsors of the Individual Social Security Investment Program Act of 2004, listen as Cato Institute president Edward H. Crane discusses the bill at a Capitol Hill news conference on July 22. The bill, based on a Cato study, would give individuals born since 1950 the option of diverting their share of the payroll tax (6.2 percent of covered wages) into a personal retirement account that they would own and control.

Well, both sides are utterly wrong. A moment's thought is enough to see that, far from being the worst, the 20th century was by far the best in history. And furthermore, things are likely to get better still. To see why, imagine, for a start, being a woman in any period in human history other than Very Recently Indeed.

### Thinking Back to 1900

At the end of the 19th century only a handful of places—including Pitcairn Island, New Zealand, and some bits of the United States—had female suffrage. Across the civilized and rich West, the legal status of women was everywhere far lower than that of men. Elsewhere it was even lower. Well into the 1960s, it was not only legal but also mandatory for women working for the British Civil Service to be paid less than their male counterparts.

At the close of the 20th century, female equality, although by no means a reality for a majority of the planet's females, was

*Continued on page 12*

### In This Issue



Media man at Cato, p. 16

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Niskanen on issues the candidates avoid</b>                         | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>What Michael Moore doesn't know about America would fill a book</b> | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>Cato events</b>   | <b>4</b>  |
| <b>No more farm subsidies?</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>New book: How the media get global warming wrong</b>                | <b>11</b> |
| <b>Downsizing the federal government</b>                               | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Ten Thousand Commandments</b>                                       | <b>14</b> |
| <b>U.S. is number 3</b>  | <b>15</b> |
| <b>Is "file sharing" theft?</b>  | <b>16</b> |
| <b>Upcoming events</b>   | <b>17</b> |
| <b>To be governed . . .</b>  | <b>20</b> |

# “The 20th century was by far the best in history. And furthermore, things are likely to get better still.”

**NO TIME** *Continued from page 1*

at least an overwhelmingly assumed absolute good. Today, not one state in Europe, east or west, affords men voting or property rights superior to those of women. The same is true in the United States, Canada, Australasia, Japan, and even much of the Third World. States where women cannot vote or where they have unequal status before the law—the case in many Muslim countries—are treated by the rest of the world with a degree of contempt. Men too had a rough time of it before 1900. Most of the world then was effectively under military, monarchial, or colonial dictatorship. No wonder women’s rights were anathema in so many places when men’s rights were also denied.

The conservatives argue that our society is the most ill-mannered in history. Really? Let’s go back to the 1950s, shall we, the so-called golden age of politeness when gentlemen always took off their hats on entering a building, children minded their p’s and q’s, and women were unfamiliar with the ways of the door handle. Signs saying “No blacks, no Irish,” seen on boarding houses and hotels after the first waves of postwar immigration, were affronts to decency and good manners unthinkable today. People used crude racial epithets without shame, and the wealthy showed their inbreeding by behaving with grotesque condescension toward the lower orders, a term used without irony well into the last century.

The 20th century saw some terrible excesses. We will be arguing for eternity about the balance sheet of horror, Hitler vs. Stalin vs. Pol Pot. But the point is that our horror was partly generated by the mechanized nature of the slaughter—slaughter that was performed against the backdrop of unprecedented individual and social liberation in so many nations.

## The Safest Century in History

The paradoxical reality is that the 20th century—in which maybe 150–200 million people died in wars and death camps—was almost certainly the safest century in history to be alive, when all causes of death are taken into account. Even in the “peace-

ful” 19th century, perhaps 80 million people died an “unnatural” death (wars, slavery, etc.). Add to that figure the far higher incidence of infant mortality and disease and the inadequate responses to natural disasters, and it is clear that life has, generally, been getting safer and safer as time has progressed.

But what about the poor and the hungry? The tragedy in Darfur surely proves once again that while we in the rich West may be getting richer, the poor of Africa and elsewhere are just getting poorer. In fact that is not the case. As Bjørn Lomborg, the most eloquent (and informed) of the New Contrarians, has pointed out, hunger in the South is actually on the decline. “Basically we have far more food per person than we used to, even though the population has doubled since 1961,” he says. The number of people starving—defined by the UN as having insufficient food to perform light physical activity—has fallen from 35 percent of the Third World population in 1970 to 18 percent today. And the fall has not just been proportional—actual numbers of hungry people have fallen too despite a doubling of the planet’s population in the last 40 years. In our lifetimes, China, the largest country in the world, used to suffer frequent famines. Millions upon millions died. This is now simply unthinkable.

Being a woman in any other century must have been bad enough. Try being ill. In the 19th century great advances were made in medicine, most notably the development of asepsis and, especially, anesthesia. Yet there were no antibiotics until the 1930s, and a patient in a Victorian hospital was probably only marginally better off than if he had stayed at home. Surgery was a shrieking descent into hell. Anyone who doubts that today is the only day to be living in should read Fanny Burney’s famous 1811 account of her mastectomy, performed without the benefit of ether or chloroform.

The 20th century was the century when large parts of the world finally rid themselves of the plagues that periodically wiped out single- and even double-figure percentages of entire populations. In the American Civil War more than half of the soldiers on both sides contracted malaria, which remained

a common disease in Europe and North America until the 20th century. Cholera epidemics ravaged London and other European cities throughout the 19th century. A time traveler visiting the richest Western cities 150 years ago would feel he had traveled to the Third World. This is the point: then, everywhere was like Calcutta.

Global warming is perhaps the most serious part of what Lomborg calls “the Litany,” the mindset that says that things are getting inexorably worse. Most scientists, though not all, agree that something is going on. Yet many remain unconvinced by the global warming forecasts, but even if they are wrong there is little evidence to support the most outlandish predictions of doom.

## Live Long and Prosper

We live in the freest, happiest, least bigoted, healthiest, most peaceful, and longest-lived era in human history. Thanks to scientific advances, medical breakthroughs, and the unceasing march of technology, we are richer and have the power to alter and control our environment in ways that would have seemed like magic 200 years ago. This sounds Stalinist—“Progress through electrification!”—but it is true nonetheless. Thanks to technology, especially information technology, we are all more productive and richer. *The Economist* uses the Big Mac test to measure how economies shape up. I prefer the Gordon Ramsay test. In 1900 a meal at a top restaurant in London cost a couple of guineas for two—say £200, allowing for inflation. You will pay much the same today. The difference is that in 1900 only very few people could afford such a repast. Now, although still the preserve of the affluent, eating out is accessible to millions of Britons.

The Third World is still poor but, with the exception of parts of Africa and the rogue states, it is getting richer. I remember charitable appeals when I was a child for the hungry children of Thailand, now a country knocking on the door of the First World. In the aftermath of World War II, Japan starved. Now it is the world’s second economy. The gap between the poor and rich has widened, but only because the rich have got richer than the poor have. Globalization, the *bête noire* of the Luddites, is large-

---

**“At the close of the 20th century, female equality, although by no means a reality for a majority of the planet’s females, was at least an overwhelmingly assumed absolute good.”**

ly to thank for all this. Where movement of people, capital, and goods has been made free, all have, generally, prospered. Where it has not—by the introduction of tariffs or, infernally, subsidies—people have not.

### **Disaster Ahead?**

Of course our world has new horrors: drug addiction, global terrorism, and in particular the conflict between wildlife and people that will almost certainly lead to the extinction of several of what biologists call the “charismatic megafauna” by 2100. It will be sad to live in a world without pandas or tigers, but it is likely that we shall have to. Global warming may wreck the coral reefs and kill off seabirds, but as Lomborg has so monumentally pointed out, generally speaking, the environment, certainly in terms of pollution, is healthier today than at any time since the Middle Ages—and things are getting better.

There is a crisis of confidence among many people, especially the young, in the West. While our material needs have, for the most part, been accommodated, our

psychological welfare has been given some severe knocks by the Brave New World we have wrought. In the new century, the seemingly global epidemics of anxiety, depression, and stress will need to be addressed with as much vigor as TB and malaria were in the last. And there is AIDS, of course, proving that the old specter of infectious disease is still very much with us. Even here, though, the figures give cause for optimism that the great African epidemic, at least, may have started to burn itself out.

It is, however, quite possible, as the Astronomer Royal Sir Martin Rees suggests in his entertaining book *Our Final Century*, that something may come out of left field and get us. It seems that nuclear war remains the most plausible short-term threat to our civilization, but we cannot discount the possibility of a terrifying GM-viral plague wiping us out in weeks or that of some particle physics experiment going terribly wrong. Clearly we need to be on our guard.

But why do we persist in believing that things are getting worse? The answer comes in the realization that it has always been thus,

and we always forget the previous, failed merchants of doom. We have forgotten Paul Ehrlich’s 1960s’ prophecy that a population explosion would lead to starvation in America by the 1990s. We have forgotten Thomas Malthus’s 1790s’ predictions that European famine was a certainty. We have forgotten all those silly pundits claiming that the world would end on January 1, 2000, as the millennium bug struck. There seems to be a need to believe that we are living in the Last Days hardwired into our psyche. Perhaps our ancestors, battling against the harshness and dangers of the African plains, had good reason to be suspicious whenever the going appeared to be too good. Their response was to dream up angry gods to appease; ours is provided by the new religion of militant environmentalism.

Now is good; the future, barring some calamitous accident, will be better. The past is truly a different country, a disease-ravaged, hungry, violent, intolerant place in which no one in his right mind would want to live. They did things differently there. Good riddance to them. ■

---