



# **It's Better Than It Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear**

*Gregg Easterbrook*

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## **It's Better Than It Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear** Gregg Easterbrook **Is civilization teetering on the edge of a cliff? Or are we just climbing higher than ever?**

Most people who read the news would tell you that 2017 is one of the worst years in recent memory. We're facing a series of deeply troubling, even existential problems: fascism, terrorism, environmental collapse, racial and economic inequality, and more.

Yet this narrative misses something important: by almost every meaningful measure, the modern world is better than it ever has been. In the United States, disease, crime, discrimination, and most forms of pollution are in long-term decline, while longevity and education keep rising and economic indicators are better than in any past generation. Worldwide, malnutrition and extreme poverty are at historic lows, and the risk of dying by war or violence is the lowest in human history.

It's not a coincidence that we're confused--our perspectives on the world are blurred by the rise of social media, the machinations of politicians, and our own biases. Meanwhile, political reforms like the Clean Air Act and technological innovations like the hybridization of wheat have saved huge numbers of lives. In that optimistic spirit, Easterbrook offers specific policy reforms to address climate change, inequality, and other problems, and reminds us that there is real hope in conquering such challenges. In an age of discord and fear-mongering, *It's Better Than It Looks* will profoundly change your perspective on who we are, where we're headed, and what we're capable of.

## **It's Better Than It Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear Details**

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**Gregg Easterbrook**

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# From Reader Review It's Better Than It Looks: Reasons for Optimism in an Age of Fear for online ebook

## Anna says

I am so steeped in the culture of fear-mongering that even though this book espouses optimism at every turn I found myself more afraid on some of the issues presented after I read the book than I was before! This is why it took me some time to finish the book. Having finally finished it I am glad I read it and will try to be more hopeful about what might happen in the future. Perhaps I can learn to fact check those politicians and news media that spew out the pessimism.

Popsugar 2018 (advanced): A book about a problem facing society today

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## Peter Mcloughlin says

I have many policy disagreements with the author, for example, his take on entitlements but I agree with most of the spirit of the book. Things are not as bad as they look and holding on to an overly pessimistic view of current events can lead to problems of our own making. Remember kiddies right-wing authoritarian ideologies thrive on fear. Things are not as bad as they seem and will get better more from an outlook that looks more for the positive than dwell on the negative.

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## Daniel says

This could also be called something like "The Neoliberal Manifesto" in that it posits market forces as the greatest agent for change in the history of the world. Which is a view to which I very reservedly subscribe.

The good: I think, probably, nearly everybody who is optimistic at heart should read or listen to this if only to have access to solid arguments for rebutting everybody who whines about how awful the world is.

Easterbrook presents oodles of evidence that we, as a collective species, are in the best shape of our history, and there is obviously something to that view. And Easterbrook knows quite a bit about quite a bit. Large swatches of society are covered, from food to medicine to the military to even social media, and he speaks about all of these subjects knowledgeably, if a bit reductively.

Alas, he unbalances his arguments more than a bit, nearly all of which were already simplified, further weakening their case. An example is that he makes an extremely compelling (Milton Friedman-ian) claim for Basic Universal Income as a way to fix all manner of social justice ills, with fiscal benefits besides.

However, to get there, he dismisses taxes on the rich as a remedy for income inequality on the basis of the relatively small distributive effect of income tax redistribution. What he does *not* mention are inheritance taxes, which are ground zero for any discussion of reduction of inequality. I use this as a for-instance only because it is one of the most obvious examples, even if it is also one of the most egregious.

All of this said, though, I strongly recommend it to anybody who is worried that the world is going or has gone to heck. If you've ever worried about a pandemic super-flu, or think global famine is right around the corner because of population, this will at least, likely, put those fears at rest. Which, peace of mind is worth a few hours of your life to read a book, right?

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## Joseph A Oppenheim says

What first attracted me to this book by Gregg Easterbrook, is the testimonial by Walter Isaacson, since I respect his journalism.

The book is a persuasive look at how, despite the dystopian look at America as presented by the 2016 campaign of the new president, things are actually not just pretty good, but are quite an advancement from the past for most, as the author states the arrow of history always points up. And as with all societal advancements, come disruptions to many who either can't or won't adapt to the changes, and government is slow to provide help to those disadvantaged by the progress.

Though the progress might be hard to see by many in the US or Europe, the middle class is shrinking because most leaving are moving up, and since 1990, extreme world poverty has declined from 37% to 10%.. Sure, reform is needed along with the changes, and the author addresses the possible reforms needed while also pointing out how the disadvantaged can currently adapt. The author goes into tackling the following.

Are we starving? No, high yield farming has not only solved that, but the world's population growth rate peaked around 1960, dropping from about 2.3% to 1.4% per year now. Yet popular films like The Hunger Games portray a future of starvation.

Why, despite all our bad habits, are we living longer? Better healthcare, better disability handling like telecommuting, plus there is a strong correlation between better education and longer life expectancy.

Will nature collapse? Mt. St. Helens' 1980 eruption was equal to about the power of 1,500 Hiroshima nuclear bomb explosions. Some predicted that needed farmland would destroy our forests, yet since 1980 our forest cover has increased about 15%. Plus, replacements for CFC refrigerants have improved the atmosphere, as have smog controls. 3D seismology, fracking and better car efficiency standards have erased dire warnings of peak oil,

Will the economy collapse? No, basically market economics, with its distributed decision making, eliminated the situation of one leader causing a collapse. There never was a time when all jobs were secure, but there never were more US manufacturing jobs than in 2017. Despite claims that our workforce participation is down, it is about 63% compared to the low of 60% in 1966. Plus, those who complain that GDP growth is slowing, ignore that measurements of GDP are less accurate, like surgeries produce better results. The author does suggest GDP growth could improve with less regulation and public financing of political campaigns. Government efficiency and less debt can be achieved by replacing many social programs with a universal basic income or expanded earned income tax credits. And since a person's intelligence is pretty much developed by age 6, extending paid work leave to parents of young children would improve population achievements.

Why is violence in decline? Murder and war deaths per capita don't even appear in the top ten causes of death. The greatest deterrent to crime is the more likely chance of being caught, thus just the cellphone has reduced crime. Less colonialism, more treaties and trade have reduced war. And as devices improve, so does morality.

Why does technology become safer instead of more dangerous? Cars, ships, locomotives, etc become not

only safer, but cleaner. Smaller and more accurate weapons reduce war deaths.

Why don't dictators win? Liberated people are more ingenious, democracies spread.

How declinism has become chic. Research centers, government agencies and political interest groups seek funding. The media looks to grab attention with negative events, often overusing the term, crisis. As demographics age, there is the human tendency to glamorize youthful times. Human bodies are good at producing adrenaline and cortisol, thus a human tendency towards anxiety over future uncertainty, recently in the US and Europe when the white majority feels threatened by immigration. New, social media leads to more opinionization, clustering of ideas called the Big Sort, people only having relationships with people who think similarly, thus more susceptible to the Big Lie.

The "impossible" challenge of climate change. Basically, see the above for clues to the future.....the Big Lie works, but there is reason for hope since not everyone believes the Big Lie.

The "impossible" challenge of inequality. Progress does breed income inequality. Moving helps, like rust belt Midwest victims moving south and to the coasts. Again, a universal basic income might help.

We'll never run out of challenges. The author mentions future challenges like more robots, artificial intelligence and quantum computing

I do recommend the book.

#Amazon

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### **David Anthony Sam says**

If you are contented by feeling that this is the worst of all possible times, that hordes of immigrants are destroying our nation, that crazy people of the left or the right are the enemy of all good, that we will run out of everything, that the world is ending soon, this is not the book for you.

By the same token, if you are looking for unicorns and flying silver puppies, this realistic analysis will not satisfy you.

But Gregg Easterbrook's rational optimism is hopeful without being Pollyannaish. It is a useful antidote to almost everything else you will read on the best seller list, on social media sites, and in the headlines that all scream declinism. And he is critical of all political parties and tribal slatnts

We do have work to do, crises to face, problems to solve, hard decisions to make, the temptations of autocratic hero leaders to avoid.

But as the author writes, "it's never too late to make a better world."

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### **D.L. Morrese says**

From the title, I expected this book to be much like those by Steven Pinker, showing how human life has steadily improved from generation to generation, about how we've reduced things like hunger, disease, poverty, crime, and war by implementing the ideas of the Enlightenment. There is some of that in these pages, but Easterbrook isn't really looking at the broad scope of history here. He is more focused on today, or at least on the last century. His main point is that things today (in general) are far better than politicians, social media, and most news reports might suggest.

Humans, he states, are predisposed by their evolution to suspect threats and be wary of the unknown. Even though most shadows are harmless, treating all as if they are bears hiding in the bushes has survival value because, every once in a while, there really is a bear. Politicians and the media exploit our inherent fears (sometimes intentionally) for their own benefit. His take on how current politicians have done so abound.

This isn't an objective or scholarly work. There is little statistical data, no graphs, no detailed analysis, and he freely shares his personal opinions and value judgments (such that Western ideals are moral and that a well regulated market economy is the economic ideal). Despite these differences, he comes to much the same conclusions as Pinker does in *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* and in *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. Things aren't only not bad; they are better than they ever have been. That doesn't mean we don't have serious problems. Disease, crime, poverty, and hunger have been reduced, but they haven't been eliminated. Challenges such as climate change and wealth disparity certainly need to be addressed. But history shows that humans are quite good at overcoming challenges.

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### **Amber Lea says**

Wow, it took me three months to read this book. I couldn't make it more than three pages without stopping to google something. I didn't think I was going to make it to the end before one of my coworkers noticed my book was criminally overdue.

But I did it!

I'm not sure how to rate it because I don't have a fully formed opinion on a lot of the things he addresses in this book. Do I agree with most of his assertions? I have no idea. But it was interesting to read a perspective I've never heard before. I also learned A LOT. This book is filled with random facts. Many of which I wanted to learn more about, hence all the googling.

I will say the tone of this book felt a little strange at times, and some times things were worded so strangely I had to reread a sentence multiple times. This is by no means a perfect book and I disagreed with him at times, but I gave it four stars because it's a fresh perspective and he makes a lot of valid points. I definitely came away feeling better about the world and would recommend it to anyone who feels exhausted by the current political climate. (And I do mean anyone, this book doesn't lean liberal or conservative.)

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### **Roozbeh Daneshvar says**

This book is a must-read, especially with the current pessimist and nostalgic good old days mood all around us. It was one of the books that changed my view significantly towards many aspects, e.g. climate change,

economy, violence and poverty. A large portion of the optimism is based on a myriad of facts and numbers, which are convincing. Yet, I have the impression that sometimes they are also based on some wishful thinking and not as concrete as the other sections. I felt that sometimes the arguments were not as solid and accurate as they could have been.

The book was very recent with references to a lot of recent developments in the world (and it felt good to read a book this much up to date). It was very well polished and well written. Yet, it seemed that The last chapters were written in haste. They did not have the clarity and flowing narration of the previous chapters. This book could have ended better.

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## **Graeme Newell says**

I loved this book. All of us are continually assaulted with a steady diet of fatalism and bad news. We are evolutionarily predisposed to scan the horizon for threats and it seems like everyone is pushing our buttons these days. New developments like social media and always-on news have provided us with an avalanche of pessimism.

But what I really loved about this book is that it isn't just empty cheerleading for positivism. Easterbrook did some impressive research. He uncovered hard data to prove his points. I learned so many things about the long history of the world's biggest problems. I had no idea so many of these problems have seen substantial improvement or have been solved. Made me damned proud of mankind!

Also I particularly enjoyed the way he managed to weave everything together into a solid narrative on so many issues that are in the headlines these days. I was intrigued by his take on thorny issues such as global conflict, welfare reform, climate change, immigration and numerous wedge issues. He brought wonderful pragmatism that cut through all the hyperbole and bluster of the theatrical world of political gamesmanship. He really made me think hard about my own biases.

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## **Barb says**

The first half of this book is a lot of stats proving that while we might live in an age of “coveted victim hood,” general life has, in fact, steadily improved over the decades. I tend to think anyone can spin numbers so while I found that half somewhat reassuring, I was also skeptical that I could find someone who could find numbers showing something differed. The second half of the book is what made this such a worthwhile read.

The author raises the point that every era has people crying out about doom and bad news. So why do so many people seem to be focusing on these doomsayers now? Rise of social media means negative news is more easily accessible - because that's what gets people attention. In turn we all feel like more negative things are happening. Opinions are more freely shared now than before as social norms have changed (and yes social media has had its influences there as well). Finally, social media serves up a hyperzoned world - we are served up media that is in tune with what we “like” so we aren't seeing a full picture. All of this reinforces the feeling of decline whether it's true or not.

Add in little fact checking or sourcing on social media and a propensity to take single anecdotes as

representatives of larger issues and you have a population that is constantly focused on what's wrong with the world.

Makes me want to continue to find the good and share it when I can. And certainly put social media in its place.

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## **Scott Lupo says**

Well, this was quite the read. First and foremost, as a reader, you will have to decide what the word optimism means to you. If the standard is 'Hey, some people die unnecessarily, some people live in miserable conditions they can't control, some people are just greedy and don't care about others. That's life. You can't save them all and it's unrealistic to really try', then this is the book for you. If the standard is 'We should always be trying to make the world better for people, we should feel compassion for those who are born into inconceivable living conditions, and we should reign in the greedy and the uncaring individuals of the world', then this book will get you hot under the collar. If your standard is closer to the second one, stick with it and read it through. There are important points in the book. For one, I totally agree with the author that every problem and issue the media covers is over dramatized, hyperbolic, and purposefully loaded with emotion. This is on purpose. All political persuasions do it. I know it's all about getting attention in a world filled with so much attention grabbing headlines, but it's out of control. Especially in a country that is emotionally stunted like the US. Some reason and logic is in order in my opinion. He's right about how not too long ago the world had awful wars that killed millions. Many super powers of the day were run by dictators, oligarchs, and authoritarians. Having a democracy where citizens had a say in government was new and experimental. And it won those wars and much of the world has now followed suit. But, let's be honest, that is NOT what we are doing today and even though death by war had declined, it is still much too high considering all the democracies in the world.

My biggest criticism is that the author cherry picks statistics to fit his narrative or refuses to ask the next question, to go a little deeper. This is especially true in his environmental outlooks. While it is true that most air pollution is in long-term decline, it's the easy ones that are in decline like carbon dioxide and sulfur dioxide. He's pretty quiet on the ones increasing, like methane, benzene, and other cancer causing agents. While it is true that there are more trees now in the US than the turn of the 20th century, globally we lose 10 billion trees each year (we think there are 3 trillion in the world) and he never asks what type of trees we are losing and what we are replacing them with. We are losing old growth and Amazon forests much faster which leaves only saplings and young trees in its wake. Again, what is the standard. Will nature collapse tomorrow? No, it will not. But we're heading towards it and doing nothing to change the path. He has one paragraph on water. One! He knows this is a huge issue but didn't want to add fear into his book of optimism. I want to give him a little credit because he was a human caused global warming denier not too long ago and has since changed his mind. But he has a lot of learning still to do.

This book is a mixed bag, just like life. For every anecdote of doom, you can find one for optimism. Anecdotes are a dime a dozen these days. I like that the author uses research, numbers, and long term trends to bolster his arguments but he tends to stop much too early before coming to his conclusions. Maybe optimism is the wrong word. There are definitely reasons to be positive that the world will not end tomorrow, or next year. Endings of civilizations rarely happen overnight. Instead, it's a long, drawn-out process that takes decades with lots of suffering in between (how cheerful!).

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## Chase Metcalf says

Well written book highlighting the many ways that life today is better than the media and general perceptions would have you believe. This misperception is generally attributed to the reality that bad news sells, the rise of social media echo chambers, and the inherent conservatism/nostalgia of growing elder population for non-existent golden age of their past.

The author reminds the reader that the majority of humanity is living longer, healthier, less violent lives than at any point in history. Acknowledging some challenges (debt, automation, inequality . . . ) the author is generally optimistic about the future of mankind.

Highly recommend this book for anyone who is worried about the future as it puts the reality of today into a positive yet realistic perspective.

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## Andrea says

I wish every person would read this book, now.

I work as a research scientist. Every day, I see misinterpretation and abuse of research findings for gain in political battle. Published studies are too often judged not on content or quality, but whether or not they can be weaponized to align with a belief system. A paper that says what you want to hear is labelled as fact; a paper that challenges your belief is junk propaganda. Both right and left are guilty, for any of you smugly reading this and pointing at your interlocutor across the aisle. It is my opinion that the right tends to put too much emphasis on belief for matters that can be settled with facts, and the left tends to over-assign factual status to matters of belief.

Easterbrook's contention is this, and I agree so much it hurts: The current mindset, both of people in general and fed by the full spectrum of media (both reputable and not), is to *believe whatever you want to believe* . Overwhelmingly, this tilts us pessimistic. It is just so much easier to believe that the other guy has it better, and you are struggling because he is screwing you over. It is in the best interest of the media and Washington, in turn, to make sure you continue believing this. Acquisition of wealth and power is greatly aided by an urgent crisis; a need to defeat that evil other guy. Newspapers won't be sold or clicked on when headlines read "Things going pretty well. Keep doing what you're doing."

This mindset breeds polarization, and polarization removes nuance from our discussions. Of course the world still has problems, but they are probably not as bad, and more easily solvable than you've been led to think. As Easterbrook often says in his football columns, did you know it's possible to both love something, and want to see it reformed?

I gently urge everyone to read this book. And if you feel afterward that this is just one guy's opinion, and you don't want to believe him, that's fine. You've just proven his (and my) point.

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## Roxanne says

This is a Goodreads win review. This book is very relevant to the times we are living in. Every I see the

news on any channel it is full of American politics, and what bad shape our country is in. We also see almost daily acts of terrorism, racism, wage inequality, sexual harassment, climate change, natural disasters from weather. So the state of things looks pretty bad. But despite these problems democracy is still the best form of government for the better world we want to live in. He states and I agree that we should banish the electoral college and replace it with the popular vote. I live in a block of states that the Democrats think we do not matter because we do not have heavy electoral votes so we were not campaigned much in and they needed our states as it turned out because they lost. The second part of the book is how we can make a better world. We need to address climate change. inequality with other countries, improve our public schools and teach skills for the labor market as every student does not go to college. and move the country forward with optimism.

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## **Sid says**

If you can ignore the politicians (they want your vote) and the news media (if it bleeds it leads), one can objectively see that never before has civilization looked this promising. Disease control, food production, peace and prosperity have been at record highs. This is the fundamental thesis that Gregg portends.

That said, the situation around the world (especially in the US) is far from perfect. Wealth disparity continues to widen. Our nation's debt levels and future social security is dubious at best. Our children's lack of drive and emphasis on learning marketable skills can be questioned. Even still, one cannot question the rise in the quality of life across the board, especially in developing countries.

The US struggles in some of the above areas. Regulations such as Universal Basic Income and investments in transportation can help ease some of the challenges we face currently. Regulations in fact served us well in the past, just look at ending slavery, regulating CO2, eliminating CFC's etc.

Ultimately we are better off today than life was 50 or 100 years ago (World Wars, working in mines, racism etc. all things of the past). Gregg urges us all to embrace Dynamism, for each day and each challenge we face is different and requires a problem solvers mindset. By embracing and relishing in the desire to improve a situation, we will continue to propel mankind forward.

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