

# Human Progress DOOMSLAYER

a newsletter that cuts through the gloom



The Human Progress Podcast | Economic Growth

## Creating the sci-fi world we were promised

The United States has a culture problem.

We once dreamed of towering cities, flying cars, and lunar colonies. Today, progress is synonymous with hubris, and new technology is feared more than it is admired.

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, James Pethokoukis, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, joins Chelsea Follett to discuss how we can restore American optimism and reclaim our sci-fi future.

Be sure to check out his new book, [The Conservative Futurist](#), and his Substack newsletter, [Faster, Please!](#)

[Listen to the interview](#)

*Below is an edited and abridged transcript featuring some highlights from the interview.*

### Tell me about the title of your book, [The Conservative Futurist](#). It's very counterintuitive. How did you come up with the title?

It does sound like an oxymoron. Like military intelligence or man bites dog. But I think conservatism and futurism do go together. I view conservatism as preserving the best parts of our inheritance, which I view as liberal democracy and market capitalism. It's our sacred responsibility to preserve that, work to make it better, and then hand it off to future generations.

That's what we should be thinking about. Conservative futurism is not nostalgia for the 1950s. It's about using all these fantastic tools that we've developed to build a better world.

### So, you're using conservative in the sense of being classical liberal, pro-innovation, and pro-free market. But there's another term that you use, which is "up-wing." Can you tell me a little bit about that?

It's a play on left-wing and right-wing, but up-wing could be a Democrat or a Republican. Up-wing is seeing the potential of humanity and then working to achieve it. It's people who think it's a big shame that we don't have nuclear power and that we're now worried about not having enough energy. Down-wing refers to people who want to go backward, who want a poor world so we don't use up the earth. I see a lot of that vision, unfortunately, all around.

### How did we go from the optimistic vision of the 1960s to Black Mirror and other dystopian science fiction?

I make the economic case. If you have a slowing economy, it's tougher to be positive. One reason we had this economic slowdown, which began in the early 1970s, is that we extracted all the big productivity gains from the great inventions of the Industrial Revolution: electrification, factories, the combustion engine, the chemical industry. That was eventually going to happen. But what did not have to happen was our response. We did two things wrong. One, we stopped funding basic science at the level we saw during the space program. And the other is we regulated.

I went into this book not wanting to blame environmentalists because I think there's a kind of environmentalism that is good. But environmental laws made it very difficult to build things in this country and created this caution about technological progress that has seeped into our culture. Suddenly, we saw all this negativity about the future. The book Limits to Growth came out. You had Silent Spring; you had this confluence of factors that created the notion that it was silly to think that the future would be better. And unfortunately, that's where we still are today.

### Do you see the degrowth mindset that's very popular today as a direct descendant of 1970s environmentalism?

We hear the same language and ideas today that we heard 50 years ago. There is an idea stagnation, a certain point of view that froze in about 1972 and has not changed. You can imagine an environmental movement that wants cleaner air, that doesn't want lead in our gasoline so that we are healthier and happier. But the environmentalism we got said that humans were the problem on the planet. Fears about radiation turned into the anti-nuclear craze. You had people with a problem with capitalism who saw nuclear power as a consumerist conspiracy to strip the planet. These views came together in the Vietnam War, which they saw as a perfect example of US techno-capitalism run amok. They saw it as this mega machine of the military and science and corporate America that was not only ruining this country through war but would eventually ruin the planet. And you see many of those same ideas today with people who don't like big tech and fear science. That view has just re-manifested in this degrowth movement.

### How do we nurture an up-wing culture?

To believe that progress is worth it, people need to believe that they can adapt to change, and that progress will lead to a better world. So that's what we have to get across. One thing that kept popping into my head when I was writing this book was the "Doomsday Clock," which was started during the Cold War and was supposed to tell us how close we were to midnight or absolute nuclear destruction. It's still around today, measuring the risk of everything from AI to pandemics and inequality. I want a Genesis Clock. How close are we to a period of amazing progress? Are we reducing the number of people in extreme poverty? How close are we to creating energy sources that are clean, abundant, and cheap? How close are we to dawn? If we start thinking about possibilities rather than constraints, we could have a very different society, which is more likely to make those achievements happen.

Another great thing I would like to return to is World's Fairs. World's Fairs were places where people would go to see new technologies up close. I think of the 1964 New York World's Fair, which had a 20-minute ride through the world of tomorrow with all the classic stereotypes: undersea cities, space colonies, soaring skyscrapers. People saw what we were trying to build. Fundamentally, economic growth is about change, change for the better, but it's still change. You have to convince people to tolerate that.

Big, exciting, inspirational projects also play a role, like Apollo. Maybe we should think about trying to build a space elevator. But listen, I work at a think tank. I'm going to talk about policies. And I think, again, a lot of what went wrong is policy-related. For every policy a government does, someone should be asking, "Is this making it easier or harder to innovate?" We also need economic openness. Letting strivers, smart, talented people, come to your country where they can do great things. Great Elon Musk quote: "There's no better place in the world to make your dreams come true than the United States." That's important. But I think what's more important than policies is thinking about what we want those policies to accomplish. We want connection, the ability for people and their ideas to connect so that we can create an innovative economy and build the world we want.

### How hopeful are you that humanity will embrace this up-wing vision?

I wasn't hopeful when I started writing the book, but I'm more hopeful now. I see things like this nuclear renaissance. The rejection of nuclear power encapsulates everything that went wrong. But that is changing. They're building and recommissioning reactors across Europe and even in Japan. It's hard to do a poll about people's views of technology, but that's a great stand-in.

I think about my friends on the left who are talking about the abundance left or supply-side liberalism. I may not agree with their methods, but they are thinking about how to make America more productive. That's fantastic. And, of course, competition with China. If OpenAI had been a Chinese company rather than an American one, it would have been a Sputnik moment. I think that the fear of losing the AI race is also a tailwind.

[Read the full transcript](#)

