




# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Fewer Americans are working at night, GLP-1s are driving down sugar demand, and oil companies are drilling more with less.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

MAR 01, 2026

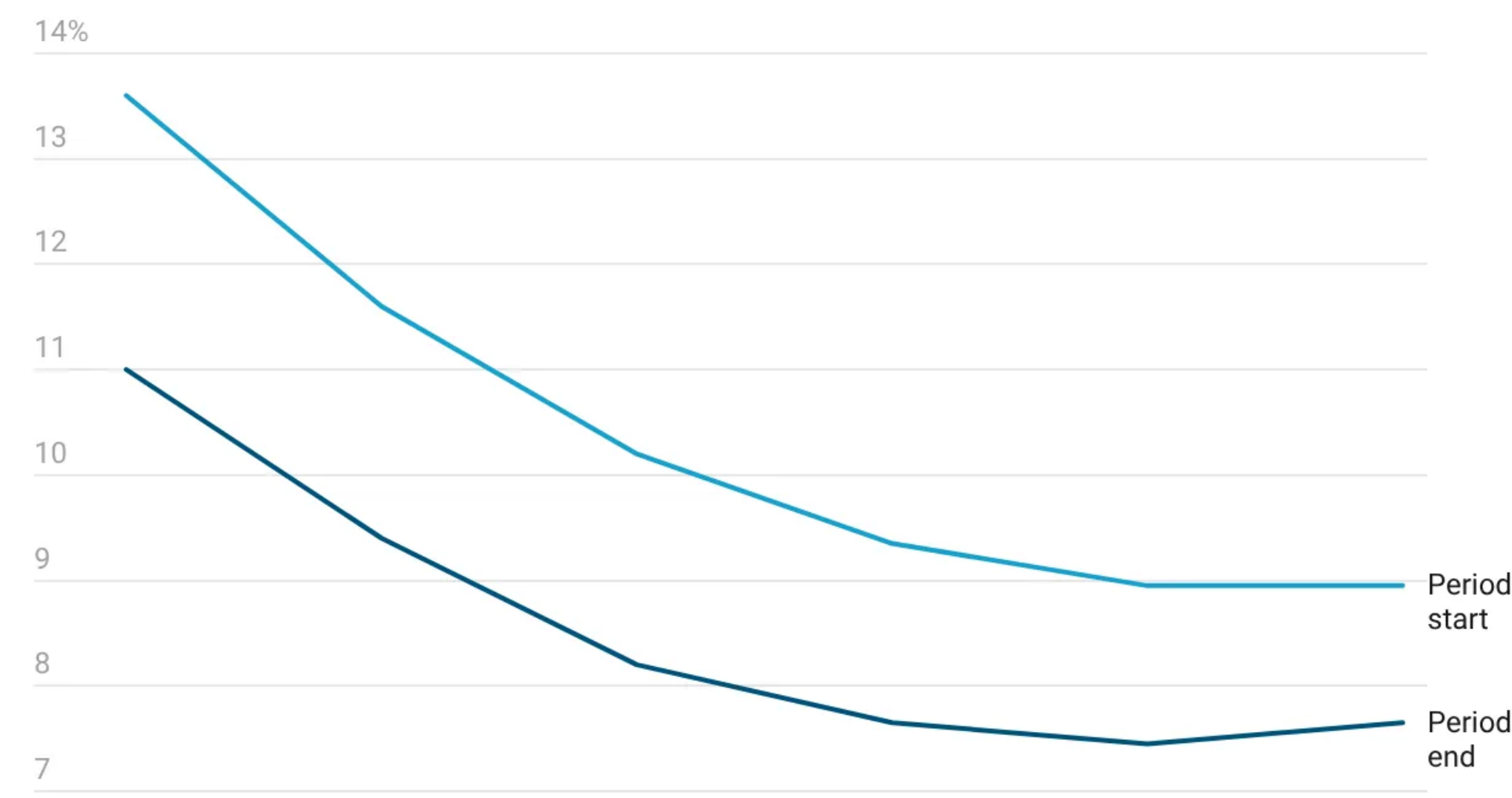
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## Economics & Development

- A newly released working paper finds that **fewer Americans are taking night shifts**. The authors used two different methods to calculate the change between two different periods (see the charts below), with each showing a clear decline in the share of US employees working at night. They argue this shift is due to workers demanding higher wage premiums for night work rather than changes in the relative size of different industries, noting that “the trend exists in all major industries except retail.”

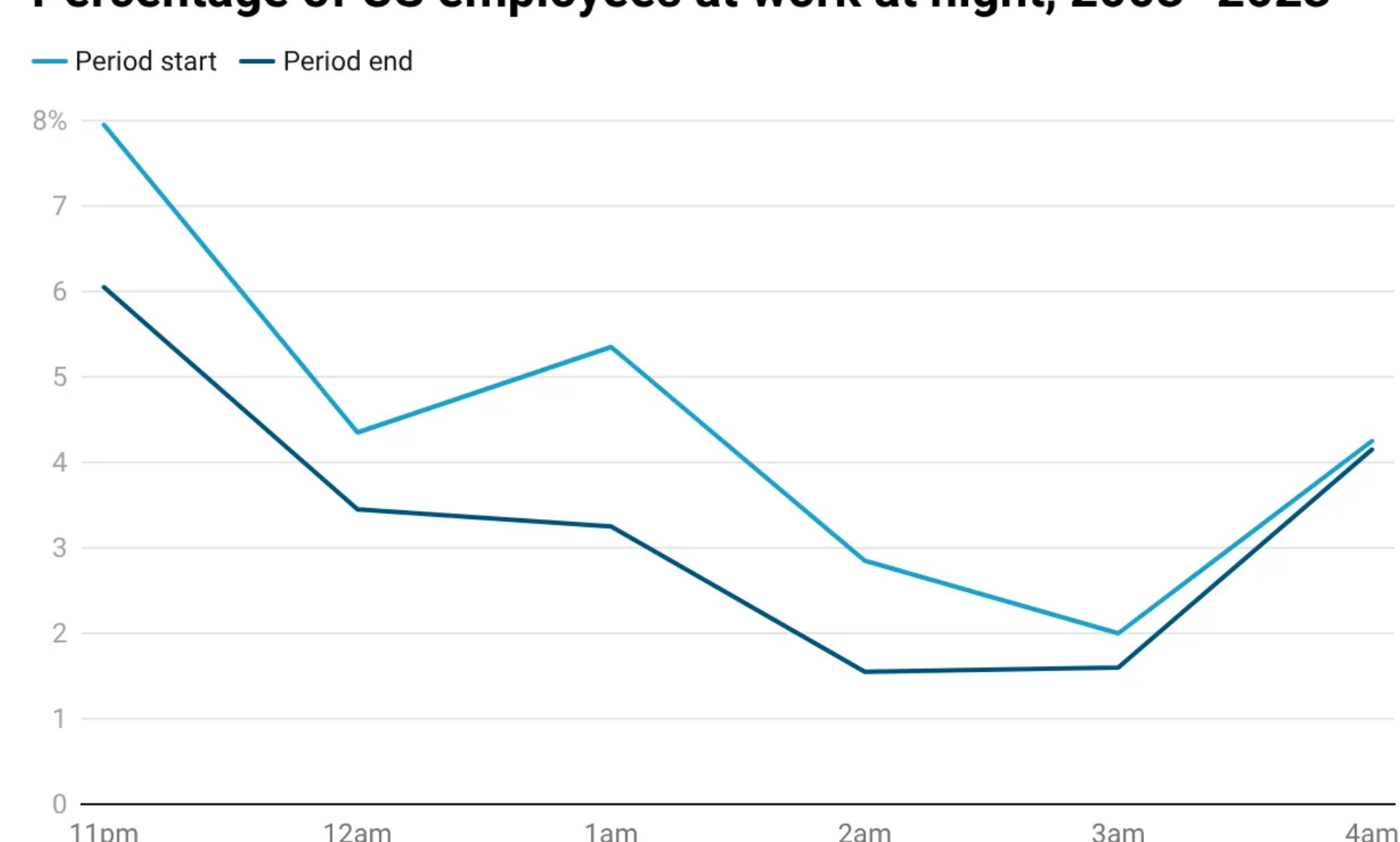
### Percentage of US employees at work at night, 1973–2004



Extrapolations from Biddle and Hamermesh. Adjusted for changes in total hours worked since 1973, to isolate shifts in timing.

Source: Current Population Survey via Biddle and Hamermesh • Created with Datawrapper

### Percentage of US employees at work at night, 2003–2023



Extrapolations from Biddle and Hamermesh. Adjusted for changes in total hours worked since 1973, to isolate shifts in timing.

Source: American Time Use Survey via Biddle and Hamermesh • Created with Datawrapper

## Energy & Environment

### Conservation and biodiversity:

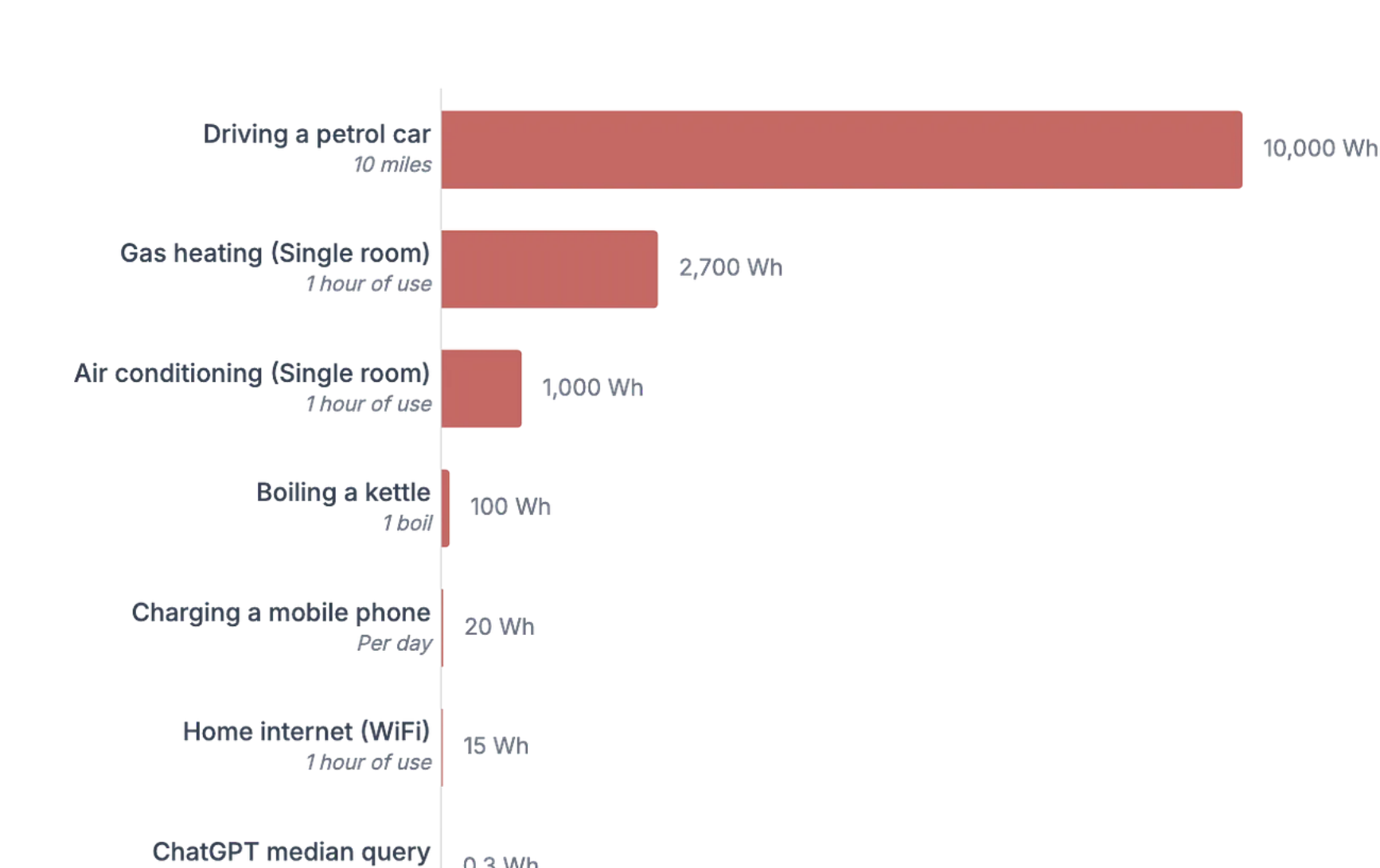
- The **wood stork is no longer considered endangered in the United States** following a sustained recovery from around 5,000 nesting pairs to over 10,000.
- The **government of Kazakhstan is replenishing its portion of the Aral Sea**, which was the world’s fourth-largest lake before it was largely emptied by Soviet irrigation projects. According to a recent statement from the Kazakh president, over the past 20 years, the **water volume in the North Aral Sea has nearly doubled**.

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## Energy and natural resources

- The *Wall Street Journal* reports that **the US is producing record quantities of crude, even as oil prices drop**. Thanks to technical improvements like remote monitoring and more efficient wells, as well as industry consolidation, drillers are pumping more oil out of the ground with fewer rigs and crews, reinforcing the industry against low prices and global competition.
- Also in the Permian, **a nuclear startup is working with a major oilfield water handler to clean up drilling wastewater**. The startup, Natura Resources, is developing small nuclear reactors that, **under the agreement**, will power water treatment and desalination systems, potentially making the vast volumes of contaminated water produced by oil wells safe for agriculture and other industrial uses.
- The data scientist Hannah Ritchie has created **an online tool showing the relative energy consumption of various technologies**. One general lesson is that the energy demands of devices that deal with bits are trifling compared to those that deal with atoms.



## Health & Demographics

- Sugar prices are at their lowest level since 2020**, and **financial analysts credit falling demand driven by GLP-1 weight loss drugs**.
- The **UK has welcomed its first baby born via a transplanted womb** from a dead donor.
- Surgeons in California have treated six children with spina bifida by applying stem cells to their spinal cords** while they were still in the womb. The babies were born without major complications, and all showed reversal of a brain abnormality tied to the condition. The experimental therapy is meant to improve on standard fetal surgery for spina bifida, after which about 60 percent of children are still unable to walk independently.

## Violence & Coercion

- While chattel slavery has been **formally abolished** worldwide, other forms of forced labor persist. Thankfully, though, they appear to be diminishing. Using data from the Varieties of Democracy Project, researchers at Our World in Data judged that **just 9 countries still practiced large-scale forced labor in 2024**, the lowest number in history.

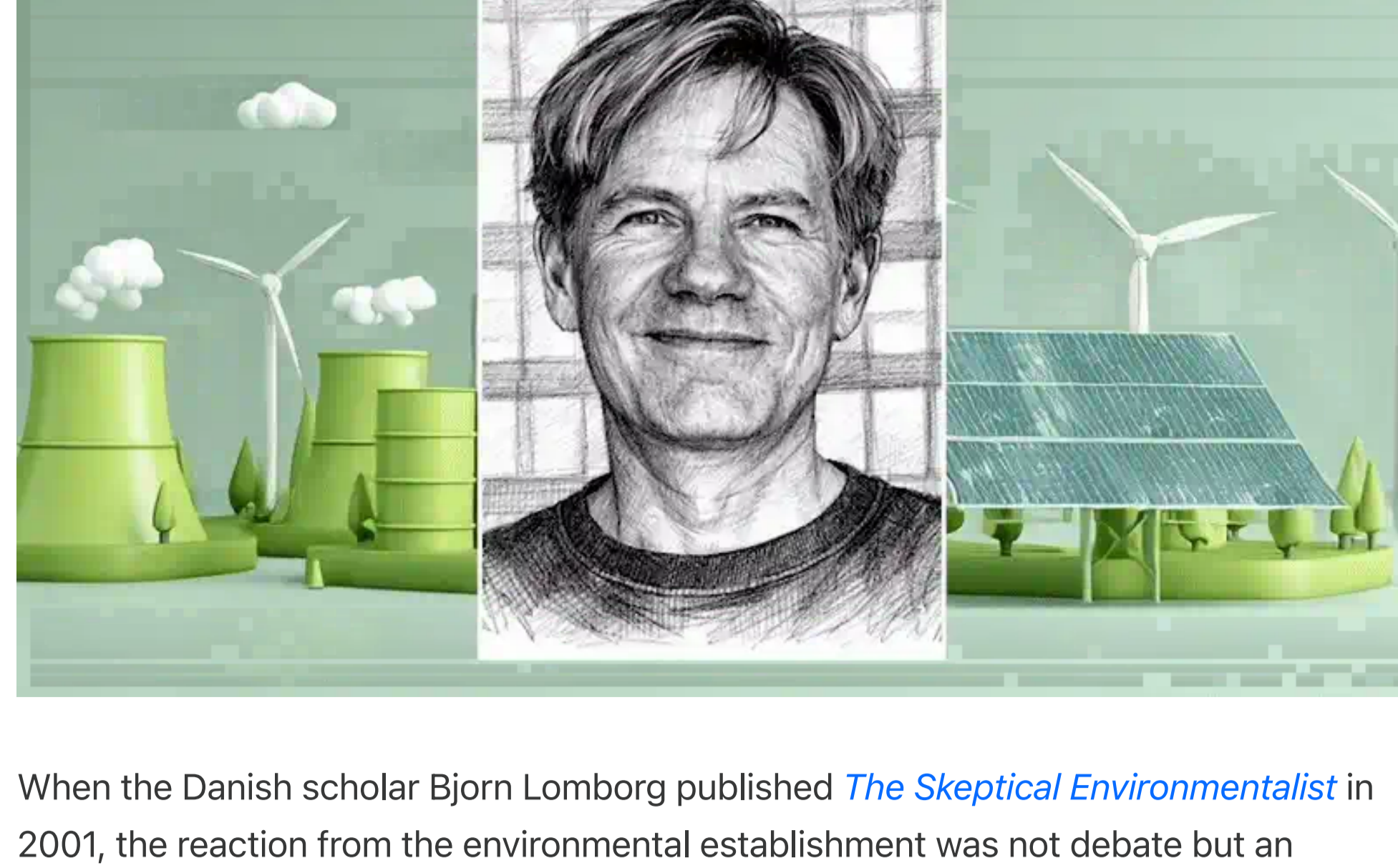
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# A Vindication of Bjorn Lomborg

Lomborg's experience shows what happens when a researcher challenges a powerful narrative with inconvenient numbers.

MARIAN L TUPY  
MAR 03, 2026

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When the Danish scholar Bjorn Lomborg published *The Skeptical Environmentalist* in 2001, the reaction from the environmental establishment was not debate but an attempted excommunication. *Scientific American* devoted a [special package](#) to attacking the book as biased and error-ridden. Union of Concerned Scientists accused him of [misrepresenting science](#) and overstating good news.

In Denmark the response went further. [The Danish Committees on Scientific Dishonesty](#) decided that *The Skeptical Environmentalist* was “clearly contrary to the standards of good scientific practice” and “objectively” fell within the concept of scientific dishonesty. Disgracefully, the Committees based their finding on biased third-party critiques, presented no documentation of errors, and engaged in rank anti-Americanism, such as alluding to “powerful interests in the USA bound up with increasing energy consumption and with the belief in free-market forces.”

The case generated international headlines and was treated as a formal stain on Lomborg's integrity. A year later Denmark's Ministry of Science threw out the initial decision on numerous counts. They found the original decision “dissatisfactory” and “emotional,” but most importantly the Ministry invalidated the decision because it was “not documented” and it was “completely void of argumentation” — something which a legally valid decision needs according to Danish law. The Ministry sent the case back to the Committees, which declined to reopen it.

The substance of Lomborg's crime was simple. He took the environmental litany of doom and gloom and checked it against long-run data from the UN, the World Bank, and other official sources. He concluded that on most indicators human welfare had improved, many environmental trends were not as catastrophic as advertised, and that resources devoted to some flagship green causes would save more lives if redirected to basic health, nutrition and economic development. He accepted that global warming is real and largely man-made but argued that the standard policy mix of aggressive near-term emissions cuts was a poor investment compared with targeted adaptation, innovation and poverty reduction.

Lomborg did not claim private revelation. Inspired by the late Cato Institute Senior Fellow Julian Simon, he spent years compiling statistics and trend lines, ultimately drawing on some 3,000 mostly secondary sources. His method was explicit: quantify problems, rank them by costs and benefits, and ask where each extra dollar does the most good. The Copenhagen Consensus project that Lomborg leads extended this logic by convening economists to compare policies ranging from HIV prevention to trade liberalisation to climate mitigation, again with the aim of maximising welfare per dollar spent.

For this, he was branded a “denier,” portrayed as a tool of fossil fuel interests, and treated as someone whose views lay outside polite discussion. DeSmog today still amusingly describes him as a “[climate crisis denier](#)” and campaigns against funders that support his work. Scientific critiques often slid into attempts to discredit him personally, and [one law review article](#) documents how even his attempts to reply in detail were met with legal threats from critics rather than open exchange in the same pages.

Two decades later, the world looks more like Lomborg's spreadsheets than like the early-2000s apocalypse rhetoric. Emissions are rising [more slowly](#) than feared, [climate-related disaster deaths have fallen](#), and poor countries still face more immediate threats from malaria, malnutrition and lack of basic infrastructure. Into this landscape, Bill Gates has recently stepped with a climate memo that reads uncannily like a Lomborg column.

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On 28 October 2025, ahead of the COP30 summit in Brazil, Gates published “[Three tough truths about climate](#)” on his Gates Notes site. There he argues that although climate change will have serious consequences, “it will not lead to humanity's demise,” and that people “will be able to live and thrive in most places on Earth for the foreseeable future.” He warns that an obsessive focus on near-term emissions targets has crowded out more effective ways to help people and calls for “a strategic pivot” toward improving lives, particularly in poor countries.

The key line could have been lifted from a Copenhagen Consensus report: “The biggest problems are poverty and disease, just as they always have been,” and limited resources should go to interventions that deliver the greatest gains for the most vulnerable. That is Lomborg's central thesis restated by one of the most influential philanthropists on the planet.

There is more than rhetorical convergence. The Gates Foundation has long supported the Copenhagen Consensus' focus on development. It has donated [over \\$3.5 million](#) to partially fund policy prioritisations in the two Indian states of Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh, a report of *Best Buys for Africa* for the African Academy of Sciences, and a stock-taking prioritisation of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Such endeavours resulted in peer-reviewed economic research showing the 12 best investments for humanity. These 12 policies are described at length in Lomborg et al.'s book *Best Things First*, which was picked as one of the best books of 2023 by both *Financial Times* and *The Economist*. In other words, Gates has not only started to sound like Lomborg on climate and development; he has been funding Lomborg's basic approach to global problem-solving for years.

Gates' memo has [sparked outrage](#) among climate activists for soft-pedaling catastrophe, for questioning temperature as the main metric of success, and for insisting that health and prosperity are the best defences against a warmer world. Yet these are precisely the points Lomborg made when he argued that rich countries should not block poor ones from using reliable energy, that adaptation and growth can greatly reduce harm, and that chasing ever more expensive emissions cuts while neglecting cheap life-saving interventions is bad ethics as well as bad economics.

Lomborg's vindication does not rest on perfection in every graph or forecast. (I have always argued that Lomborg ought to be trusted not because he gets everything right, but because—constantly checked by thousands of critics who wanted him to fail—he had every incentive to make fewer mistakes than those living in the epistemic bubble of environmental catastrophising.) It rests on three elements that his opponents tried to delegitimise but have failed to overturn.

First, he insisted on measuring long-run trends rather than reacting to headlines. That is why *The Skeptical Environmentalist* spent so many pages on fertility, food production, air and water quality, resource prices and disaster statistics. The message was that human ingenuity and market-driven growth had solved or mitigated many of the problems that earlier generations thought insoluble, and that policy should build on that record instead of assuming inevitable decline.

Second, he treated climate change as one serious problem among many, not as a singular moral crusade that trumps all other goals. His later book *Cool It* argued that some highly touted climate policies failed basic cost-benefit tests and that a mix of modest carbon pricing, technological innovation and targeted adaptation would do more good at lower cost. Gates now echoes this logic when he calls for innovation, cheap clean energy and continued investment in health and development, rather than pouring every available dollar into symbolic emissions cuts.

Third, Lomborg approached priorities as an empirical question, not as an expression of moral purity. The Copenhagen Consensus exercises rank policies by expected benefit per dollar, often putting vaccines, nutrition and basic education ahead of grand climate targets. That framework is nothing more than applied welfare economics. It is closer to the ethos of evidence-based public health than to the emotional politics that have dominated the climate debate.

That is what it means to say that Lomborg was driven by science rather than dogma or emotion. He did not deny problems. He asked how big they are, how fast they are changing, and what works best if we care about human flourishing. His opponents often responded not with better data but with attempts to brand him as illegitimate, to sic committees on him, and to deter others from asking similar questions.

The appearance of Bill Gates on Lomborg's side of the argument underscores how fragile that strategy was. If climate change is not the end of the world but people will actually *thrive*, if poverty and disease remain the main killers, and if policy should be judged by lives improved rather than tons of carbon alone, then the core of Lomborg's message stands.

There is a broader lesson. Modern societies claim to revere science, but too often turn scientific disputes into moral battles in which heretics must be shamed or silenced. Lomborg's experience shows what happens when a researcher challenges a powerful narrative with inconvenient numbers. The attempt to punish him did not change the data. It only delayed a necessary conversation about trade-offs, priorities and the best use of scarce resources.

That conversation is now unavoidable. Gates has effectively cemented Lomborg's main points, even as activists denounce them. Instead of pretending that never happened, we should recognise it for what it is: a belated vindication of the skeptical environmentalist who asked the right questions first.

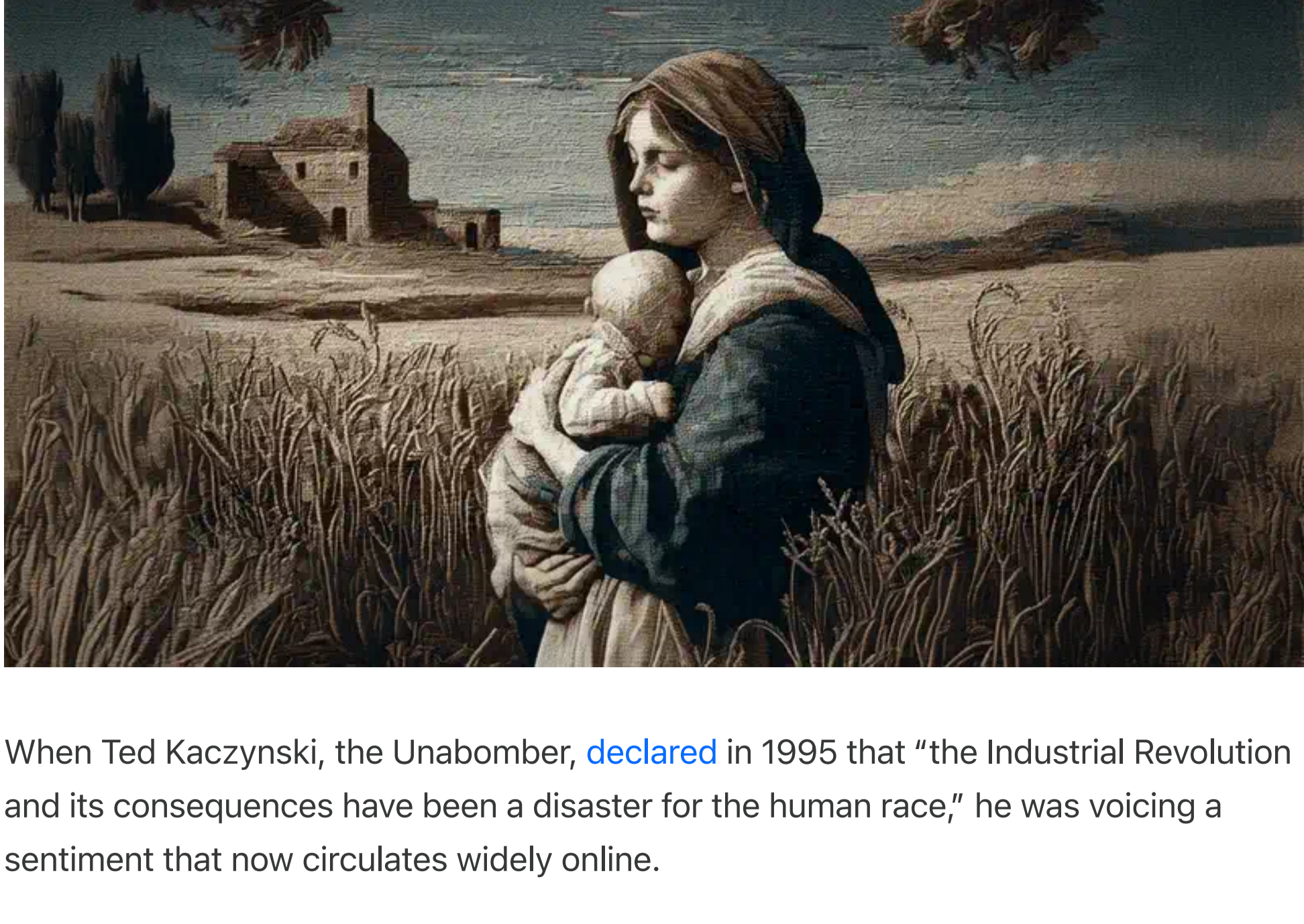
This article was originally [published](#) in Quillette on 11/20/2025.

# The Grim Truth About the “Good Old Days”

Preindustrial life wasn't simple or serene—it was filthy, violent, and short.

CHELSEA OLIVIA FOLLETT  
MAR 06, 2026

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When Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber, [declared](#) in 1995 that “the Industrial Revolution and its consequences have been a disaster for the human race,” he was voicing a sentiment that now circulates widely online.

Rose-tinted nostalgia for the preindustrial era has gone viral, strengthened by anxieties about our own digital era. Some are even claiming that modernity itself was a mistake and that “progress” is an illusion. Medieval peasants led happier and more leisurely lives than we do, according to those who pine for the past. “The internet has become strangely nostalgic for life in the Middle Ages,” journalist Amanda Mull [wrote](#) in a piece for *The Atlantic*. Samuel Matlack, managing editor of *The New Atlantis*, [observed](#) that there is currently an “endless debate around whether the preindustrial past was clearly better than what we have now and we must go back to save humanity, or whether modern technological society is unambiguously a forward leap we must forever extend.”

In the popular imagination, the Industrial Revolution was the birth of many evils, a time when smoke-belching factories disrupted humanity's erstwhile idyllic existence. Economics professor Vincent Geloso's informal [survey of university students](#) found that they believed “living standards did not increase for the poor; only the rich got richer; the cities were dirty and the poor suffered from ill-health.” Pundit [Tucker Carlson](#) has even suggested that feudalism was preferable to modern liberal democracy.

Different groups tend to idealize different aspects of the past. Environmentalists might idealize preindustrial [harmony with nature](#), while social traditionalists romanticize our ancestors' [family lives](#). People from across the political spectrum share the sense that the Industrial Revolution brought little real improvement for ordinary people.

In 2021, History.com published “[7 Negative Effects of the Industrial Revolution](#),” an article reflecting much of the thinking behind the popular impression that industrialization was a step backward for humanity, rather than a period of tremendous progress. But was industrialization really to blame for each of the ills detailed in the article?

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## “Horrible Living Conditions for Workers”

Were horrible living conditions a result of industrialization? To be sure, industrial-era living conditions did not meet modern standards—but neither did the living conditions that preceded them.

As historian Kirstin Olsen put it in her book, *Daily Life in 18th-Century England*, “The rural poor . . . crowded together, often in a single room of little more than 100 square feet, sometimes in a single bed, or sometimes in a simple pile of shavings or straw or matted wool on the floor. In the country, the livestock might be brought indoors at night for additional warmth.” In 18th-century Wales, one observer [claimed](#) that in the homes of the common people, “every edifice” was practically a miniature “Noah's Ark” filled with a great variety of animals. One shudders to think of the barnlike smell that bedchambers took on, in addition to the chorus of barnyard sounds that likely filled every night. Our forebears put up with the stench and noise and cuddled up with their livestock, if only to stave off hypothermia.

Homes were often so poorly constructed that they were unstable. The din of [collapsing buildings](#) was such a common sound that in 1688, Randle Holme defined a crash as “a noise proceeding from a breach of a house or wall.” The poet Dr. Samuel Johnson [wrote](#) that in 1730s London, “falling houses thunder on your head.” In the 1740s, “props to houses” keeping them from collapsing were listed among the most [common obstacles](#) that blocked free passage along London's walkways.

## “Poor Nutrition”

What about poor nutrition? From liberal flower children to the “Make America Healthy Again” crowd, fetishizing the supposedly chemical-free, wholesome diets of yore is bipartisan. The truth, however, is stomach-churning.

Our ancestors not only failed to eat well, but they sometimes didn't eat at all. Historian William Manchester noted that in [preindustrial Europe](#), famines occurred every four years on average. In the lean years, “cannibalism was not unknown. Strangers and travelers were waylaid and killed to be eaten.” Historian Fernand Braudel recorded a 1662 [account](#) from Burgundy, France, that lamented that “famine this year has put an end to over ten thousand families . . . and forced a third of the inhabitants, even in the good towns, to eat wild plants. . . . Some people ate human flesh.” A third of Finland's population is estimated to have died of starvation during a famine in the 1690s.

Even when food was available, it was often far from appetizing. Our forebears lived in a world where adulterated bread and milk, spoiled meat, and vegetables tainted with human waste were everyday occurrences. London bread was described in a [1771 novel](#) as “a deleterious paste, mixed up with chalk, alum and bone ashes, insipid to the taste and destructive to the constitution.” [According to](#) historian Emily Cockayne, the 1757 public health treatise *Poison Detected* noted that “in 1736 a bundle of rags that concealed a suffocated newborn baby was mistaken for a joint of meat by its stinking smell.”

Water was also far from pristine. “For the most part, filth flowed out windows, down the streets, and into the same streams, rivers, and lakes where the city's inhabitants drew their water,” [according to](#) environmental law professor James Salzman. This ensured that each swig included a copious dose of human excreta and noxious bacteria. Waterborne illnesses were frequent.

## “A Stressful, Unsatisfying Lifestyle”

Did stressful lifestyles originate with industrialization? Did our preindustrial ancestors generally enjoy a sense of inner peace? Doubtful. Sadly, many of them suffered from what they called melancholia, roughly analogous to the modern concepts of anxiety and depression.

In 1621, physician Robert Burton described a common symptom of melancholia as [waking in the night](#) due to mental stress among the upper classes. An observer said the poor similarly “feel their sleep interrupted by the cold, the filth, the screams and infants' cries, and by a thousand other anxieties.” Richard Napier, a 17th-century physician, recorded over several decades that some 20 percent of his patients suffered from insomnia. Today, in comparison, 12 percent of Americans say they have been diagnosed with [chronic insomnia](#). Stress is nothing new.

Sky-high preindustrial mortality rates caused profound emotional suffering to those in mourning. Losing a child to death in infancy was once a common—indeed, near-universal—experience among parents, but the loss was no less painful for all its ordinariness. Many surviving testimonies suggest that mothers and fathers felt acute grief with each loss. The 18th-century poem, “[To an Infant Expiring the Second Day of Its Birth](#),” by Mehetabel “Hetty” Wright—who lost several of her own children prematurely—heartrendingly urges her infant to look at her one last time before passing away.

So common were child deaths that practically every major poet explored the subject. Robert Burns wrote “[On the Birth of a Posthumous Child](#).” Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote multiple poems to [his deceased son](#). Consider the pain captured by these [lines](#) from William Shakespeare's play *King John*, spoken by the character Constance upon her son's death: “Grief fills the room up of my absent child. . . . O Lord! My boy, my Arthur, my fair son! My life, my joy, my food, my all the world!” Shakespeare's own son died in 1596, around the time the playwright would have finished writing *King John*.

Only in the modern world has child loss changed from [extraordinarily common to exceedingly rare](#). As stressful as modern life can be, our ancestors faced forms of heartache that most people today will never endure.

## “Dangerous Workplaces” and “Child Labor”

Dangerous workplaces and child labor both predate the Industrial Revolution. In agrarian societies, entire families would labor in fields and pastures, including pregnant women and young children. Many preindustrial children entered the workforce at what today would be considered preschool or kindergarten age.

In poorer families, children were sent to work by age 4 or 5. If children failed to find gainful employment by age 8, even social reformers unusually sympathetic to the plight of the poor, would express open disgust at such a lack of industriousness. [Jonas Harway](#) was [reportedly](#) “revolted by families who sought charity when they had children aged 8 to 14 earning no wages.”

For most, work was backbreaking and unending. A common myth suggests that preindustrial peasants worked fewer days than modern people do. This misconception originated from an early estimate by historian Gregory Clark, who initially proposed that peasants labored only 150 days a year. He later [revised this figure](#) to around 300 days—higher than the modern average of 260 working days, even before factoring in today's paid holidays and vacation time.

Physically harming one's employees was once widely accepted, too, and authorities stepped in only when the mistreatment was exceptionally severe. In 1666, one such case [occurred](#) in Kittery, in what is now Maine, when Nicholas and Judith Weekes caused the death of a servant. Judith confessed that she cut off the servant's toes [with an axe](#). The couple, however, was not indicted for murder, merely for cruelty.

## “Discrimination Against Women”

The preindustrial world was hardly a model of gender equality—discrimination against women was not an invention of the early industrialists but a long-standing feature of many societies.

Domestic violence was widely tolerated. In London, a 1595 [law](#) dictated: “No man shall after the houre of nine at the Night, keepe any rule whereby any such suddaine outcry be made in the still of the Night, as making any affray, or beating hys Wife, or servant.” In other words, no beating your wife after 9:00 p.m. That was a [noise regulation](#). A similar law forbade using a hammer after 9:00 p.m. Beating one's wife until she screamed was an ordinary and acceptable activity.

Domestic violence was celebrated in popular culture, as in the lively folk song “[The Cooper of Fife](#),” a traditional Scottish tune that inspired a country dance and influenced similar English and American ballads. To modern ears, the contrast between its violent lyrics and upbeat melody is unsettling. The song portrays a husband as entirely justified in his acts of domestic violence, inviting the audience to side with the wifebeater and cheer as he beats his wife into submission for her failure to perform domestic chores to her husband's satisfaction.

Sexist laws often empowered men to abuse women. If a woman earned money, her husband could legally claim it at any time. For instance, [in 18th-century Britain](#), a wife could not enter into contracts, make a will without her husband's approval, or decide on her children's education or apprenticeships; moreover, in the event of a separation, she automatically lost custody. Mistreatment of women, in other words, long predated industrialization. Arguably, it was the increase in female labor force participation during the Industrial Revolution that ultimately gave women greater economic independence and strengthened their [social bargaining power](#).

## “Environmental Harm”

While many of today's environmental challenges—such as climate change and plastic pollution—differ from those our forebears faced, environmental degradation is not a recent phenomenon. Worrying about environmental impact, however, is rather new. Indeed, as historian Richard Hoffmann has [pointed out](#), “Medieval writers often articulated an adversarial understanding of nature, a belief that it was not only worthless and unpleasant, but actively hostile to . . . humankind.”

Consider deforestation. The [Domesday Survey of 1086](#) found that trees covered 15 percent of England; by 1340, the share had fallen to 6 percent. France's forests [more than halved](#) from about 30 million hectares in Charlemagne's time (768–814) to 13 million by Philip IV's reign (1285–1314).

Europe was hardly the only part of the world to abuse its forests. A 16th-century witness [observed](#) that at every proclamation demanding more wood for imperial buildings, the peasants of what are today the Hubei and Sichuan provinces in China “wept with despair until they choked,” for there was scarcely any wood left to be found.

Despeciation is also nothing new. Humans have been exterminating wildlife since prehistory. The past 50,000 years saw about 90 genera of large mammals [go extinct](#), amounting to over 70 percent of America's large species and over 90 percent of Australia's.

Exterminations of species occurred throughout the preindustrial era. People [first](#) settled in New Zealand in the late 13th century. In only 100 years, humans exterminated 10 species of moa in addition to at least 15 other kinds of native birds, including ducks, geese, pelicans, coots, Haast's eagle, and an indigenous harrier. Today, few people realize that lions, hyenas, and leopards were [once native](#) to Europe, but by the first century, human activity eliminated them from the continent. The final known auroch, Europe's native wild ox, was [killed](#) in Poland by a noble hunter in 1627.

## Progress Is Real

History bears little resemblance to the sanitized image of preindustrial times in the popular imagination—that is, a beautiful scene of idyllic country villages with pristine air and residents merrily dancing around maypoles. The healthy, peaceful, and prosperous people in this fantasy of pastoral bliss do not realize their contented, leisurely lives will soon be disrupted by the story's villain: the dark smokestacks of the Industrial Revolution's “[satanic mills](#).”

Such rose-colored views of the past bear little resemblance to reality. A closer look shatters the illusion. The world most of our ancestors faced was in fact more gruesome than modern minds can fathom. From routine spousal and child abuse to famine-induced cannibalism and streets that doubled as open sewers, practically every aspect of existence was horrific.

A popular saying holds that “the past is a foreign country,” and based on recorded accounts, it is not one where you would wish to vacation. If you could visit the preindustrial past, you would likely give the experience a zero-star rating. Indeed, the trip might leave you permanently scarred, both physically and psychologically. You might long to unsee the horrors encountered on your adventure and to forget the shocking, gory details.

The upside is that the visit would help deromanticize the past and show how far humanity has truly come—emphasizing the utter transformation of everyday lives and the reality of progress.

*This article was [published](#) at Big Think on 11/19/2025.*




[Read more about the Grim Old Days](#)

# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Investment in South Africa, a new sodium-cooled nuclear reactor, \$100 genome sequencing, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

MAR 08, 2026

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## Economics & Development

- **Operation Vulindlela, a South African deregulatory initiative, appears to be stimulating private investment in the country.** Recently announced private infrastructure projects total [382.5 billion rand](#) (23 billion USD), more than triple the amount recorded in 2024.

## Energy & Environment

- Conservationists suspect that **wild California condors have laid an egg in Northern California for the first time in more than a century**, suggesting the population is beginning to breed on its own. After decades of conservation work, the endangered species has rebounded from near-extinction to more than 600 birds.
- **A coral breeding lab in the Seychelles has recorded its first coral spawning event**, a milestone for efforts to restore damaged reefs. Most coral breeding projects rely on cloning coral fragments, but spawning can produce more genetically diverse and resilient corals.
- The nuclear power company **TerraPower has received a permit from the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission to build a sodium-cooled reactor** in Wyoming, the first approval for a non-water-cooled commercial reactor in decades. Sodium cooling allows reactors to operate at higher temperatures and lower pressures than conventional water-cooled plants, which can improve efficiency. The design will also include thermal storage, allowing the reactor to store energy as heat during periods of low demand.

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## Health & Demographics

- A new [working paper](#) suggests that **remote work may help boost fertility**. Using survey data from 38 high- and middle-income countries, the researchers found that couples who work from home at least one day a week have about 0.32 more children on average than those who don't.
- **Undernourishment is falling again in Latin America and the Caribbean.** 5.1 percent of people in the region were undernourished in 2024, down from 6.1 percent in 2020, but still slightly above the historic low in 2014.
- After 30 years without a locally contracted case, **Chile has been verified by the WHO for eliminating leprosy.**
- **More than 200,000 children in Nigeria's Kebbi State have received the R21 malaria vaccine**, and local health centers report a [50 percent drop](#) in malaria diagnoses since the vaccination campaign began.

## Science & Technology

- **Aurora Innovation, a self-driving truck company, has expanded its network to 10 routes**, including a 1,000-mile circuit between Fort Worth, Texas, and Phoenix, Arizona. On such long routes, the company says **its trucks can cut transit times in half** by avoiding regulations that limit the number of hours a human trucker can drive continuously.
- The market analyst Daniel Marques found that **Waymo's recently disclosed remote operator ratio is far lower** than that of its Chinese competitors.
- A San Diego biotech startup claims its **new gene-sequencing system can read an entire human genome for about \$100.**

## Violence & Coercion

- **Croatia is officially free of landmines** set during its 1990s war of independence.

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# Ice Blocks to Electrons: The Rise of Refrigeration Abundance

Workers today get 214 refrigerators for the price of one in 1925.

GALE POOLEY  
MAR 10, 2026

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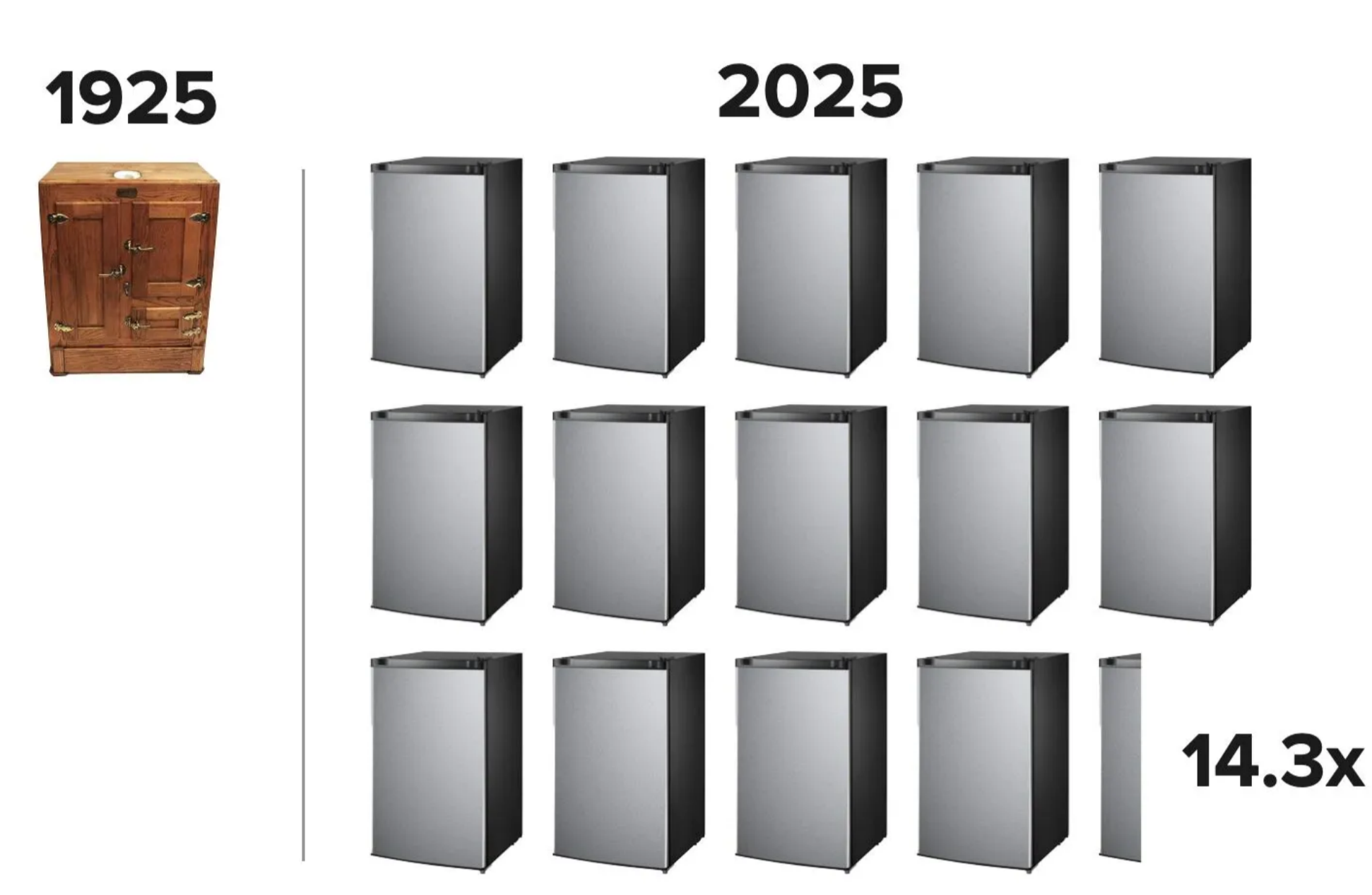
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In 1925, households kept food cool with [iceboxes](#)—wooden insulated cabinets chilled by a block of ice. Depending on size and quality, they typically cost between \$15 and \$50. With entry-level workers earning about \$0.25 an hour, a \$35 icebox carried a time price of 140 hours.

Today, a 4.4-cubic-foot mini fridge at Walmart sells for about \$184. Entry-level workers in limited-service restaurants earn roughly \$18.75 an hour, bringing the time price down to just 9.8 hours.

For the time it took a worker in 1925 to earn the money for one icebox, a worker today can buy 14.3 mini fridges.



The 1925 icebox didn't actually come with any ice. The price of a 100-pound block of ice in 1925 was typically \$0.25, and that could double during "ice famines" caused by mild winters. At \$0.25 an hour, a 100-pound block of ice would cost one hour and would generally last for three to seven days. If the ice block lasted five days that would be a time price of 12 minutes a day.

The Walmart mini fridge requires 269 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per year, or 0.74 kWh per day. Residential electricity runs around \$0.12 per kWh, so a year's supply of electricity for cooling will cost \$32.28, or 1.72 hours for entry-level workers. Spread out over the year, it would require 17 seconds a day.

For the time it took a worker in 1925 to earn the money to buy ice cooling for a day, workers today get 43 days of electric cooling.

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Electric refrigerators entered American homes in 1927 when General Electric introduced the iconic "Monitor Top," named for its resemblance to the *USS Monitor*, a Civil War ironclad warship. The unit sold for \$525. With entry-level workers earning \$0.25 an hour, the time price came to an extraordinary 2,100 hours. Today, the Walmart mini fridge costs 9.8 hours of work. The time price has fallen 99.53 percent. For the time it took a worker in 1927 to earn enough money for one electric refrigerator, a worker today can buy 214 mini fridges—a stunning increase of 21,300 percent in refrigeration abundance, compounding at 5.62 percent a year.

**The gift that simplifies housekeeping  
... and safeguards health**

**IF** you could wrap lighter house-tasks in a nice little box and close them with a not-to-be-opened-till-Christmas seal, wouldn't you like to send them to some one you know? Well, you can come pretty close to doing just that. A General Electric Refrigerator is one sure way of making life easier for the woman who runs the house. It cuts marketing trips, it simplifies menu-planning, it gives new ease and variety to cooking. It keeps foods healthfully fresh.

And now that you've decided on an electric refrigerator, consider especially this new-day General Electric. It is radically different from all others—really "years ahead" in design. It is so completely automatic that it never even needs oiling. All its machinery is safely sealed in an air-tight steel casing, on the top, away from floor dirt.

These revolutionary refrigerators are developed, produced and guaranteed by General Electric . . . a strong assurance of their truly superior quality. Write for Booklet B-12.

**GENERAL ELECTRIC**  
**Refrigerator**  
"Makes it Safe to be Hungry"

ELECTRIC REFRIGERATION DEPARTMENT · OF GENERAL ELECTRIC COMPANY · HANNA BUILDING · CLEVELAND, OHIO

The US population has tripled from 116 million in 1925 to 348 million today. For every 1 percent increase in population, personal refrigerator abundance has increased 106 percent ( $21,300\% \div 200\% = 106\%$ ).

Find more of Gale's work at his Substack, [Gale Winds](#).

# Olive Oil Prices Are Falling—So Should Olive Oil Climate Hysteria

Climate alarmists jump to hasty conclusions, then fail to correct the record.

HUMAN PROGRESS

MAR 13, 2026

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By [Ben Lieberman](#)

It's the follow-up story that never gets written. An agricultural commodity experiences a period of below-average yields and rising prices, and it is reported as a climate change-induced crisis. Then, after another year or two, the trend reverses, but there are few, if any, attempts to correct the record.

Olive oil prices are a recent example. Spain, the world's largest producer of olives for oil, experienced severe heat and drought in the summers of 2022 and 2023, contributing to much lower yields and major price spikes in 2023 and into 2024.

There were several news accounts at the time warning about a new reality in which human-induced warming would decimate olive yields. An August 2023 [CNN story](#) entitled "Olive Oil is in Trouble as Extreme Heat and Drought Push the Industry Into Crisis" was typical. Citing scientists and industry experts, the article told us that the episode "would have been virtually impossible without climate change."

The story, and others like it, painted a bleak future for those making their living from olives and a new normal of higher olive oil prices for consumers. Beyond olives, CNN informed readers that "Experts warn of worse to come for food production, as the human-caused climate crisis increases the frequency and severity of extreme weather."

However, toward the end of 2024, olive oil prices began falling sharply and remain well below their peak, according to the [Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis](#). The two most recent crops in Spain and other olive-growing nations have yielded enough to [increase olive oil production substantially](#). Overall, the olive oil industry appears to be most of the way back to normal—hardly a crisis.

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That should have surprised no one, especially the self-described experts relied upon in the gloomy coverage. Yields for olives, as with virtually every other agricultural commodity, have experienced year-to-year fluctuations throughout recorded history. While climate change's influence on olives is entirely possible, an off year or two proves nothing. Over the longer term, overall yields for food crops have [increased severalfold](#), especially in recent decades, when climate change was supposedly a headwind. Improved agricultural methods—which depend on fossil fuels for energy and fertilizer—have swamped any adverse climate impacts, if such impacts exist.

It is also worth noting the substantial scientific evidence that the release of carbon dioxide, blamed for contributing to climate change, has [benefits for plant growth](#) and may well be a net positive for agriculture. This may also help explain why agricultural bad news rarely has staying power while long-term trends remain positive.

In any event, the media outlets that raised the olive oil alarms ought to publish follow-up stories reporting the good news and conceding that the climate change link is not nearly as clear-cut as the original coverage suggested. None have done so.

Maybe it's because they are too busy writing about the [chocolate crisis](#).

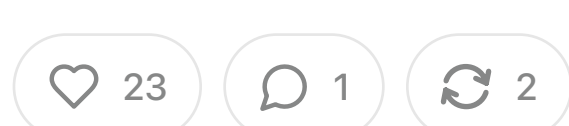
*Author: Ben Lieberman, a senior fellow who specializes in environmental policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute.*

# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

More farmers are planting GM crops, dogs are biting less in India, the largest HPV vaccination program in history, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

MAR 15, 2026



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## Economics & Development

- In an attempt to address concerns about the accuracy of its national accounts, India's Ministry of Statistics has [revised how it calculates GDP](#). The new methodology finds that **India's economy is 3.3 percent smaller than previously estimated but also growing faster**, expanding 7.1 percent in fiscal year 2025, up from an earlier estimate of 6.5 percent.

## Energy & Environment

- China's** environmental ministry [recently stated](#) that the country's **economy grew 30 percent** over the past five years while **average particulate air pollution fell by 20 percent**.
- Bearded vultures are recovering in the Alps**. The wild Alpine populations were hunted to extinction in the early 1900s, but after decades of conservation work, they have rebounded to [over 100 breeding pairs](#).
- Panama golden frogs are returning to the wild** 17 years after they were wiped out by the deadly (to amphibians) *B. dendrobatidis* fungus.

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## Food & Hunger

- More farmers in more countries are planting genetically modified crops**, which help raise crop yields and farmer incomes and often reduce the need for agrochemicals. According to a [recent industry report](#), genetically modified crops were planted on 218.7 million hectares of cropland in 2024 across 31 countries, up from 181.5 million hectares and 28 countries a decade earlier.

## Health & Demographics

- India has launched a huge HPV prevention program** that aims to vaccinate each annual cohort of 14-year-old girls.
- Kenya and Zimbabwe have received their first doses of lenacapavir**, which prevents HIV infection with just two yearly injections.
- Dogs are biting less in India**. A 2025 survey reported 9.1 million dog bites, down from 17 million recorded in 2003. Over the same period, the number of rabies deaths in India dropped from over 17,000 to 5,726.
- Japanese regulators have conditionally approved two induced pluripotent stem cell therapies**, one for Parkinson's disease and another for heart failure, marking the first commercial approvals for the technology.
- The first large clinical trial of **a vaccine against enterotoxigenic *E. coli***—a leading cause of travelers' diarrhea and severe childhood diarrhea—has shown [promising results](#). In a study of nearly 5,000 infants in Gambia, the experimental vaccine reduced dangerous diarrhea and produced no serious side effects.

## Science & Technology

- A [large psychology study](#) finds that **we consistently underestimate other people's honesty**. Across 11 experiments involving more than 8,000 participants, volunteers completed tasks where they could lie anonymously for personal gain—for example, by falsely claiming they guessed a die roll correctly to win money—and were also asked to estimate how many others would lie in the same situation. On average, participants overestimated the share of people who would lie by about 14 percentage points.
- The Metropolitan Museum of Art has begun adding highly detailed 3D models of artworks and artifacts to its website**, letting online users inspect the objects from every angle. They also added an augmented reality feature for smartphones that allows you to interact with the virtual objects at their true scale, say by "walking through" the model of the Temple of Dendur.
- The US Federal Aviation Administration has announced **a set of pilot projects** for a new species of aircraft. Most **will test eVTOLs, or small, electric, drone-like aircraft that take off and land vertically** rather than using a runway. The program will let companies such as Joby Aviation and Archer Aviation trial passenger flights, cargo delivery, and emergency services while regulators gather data.

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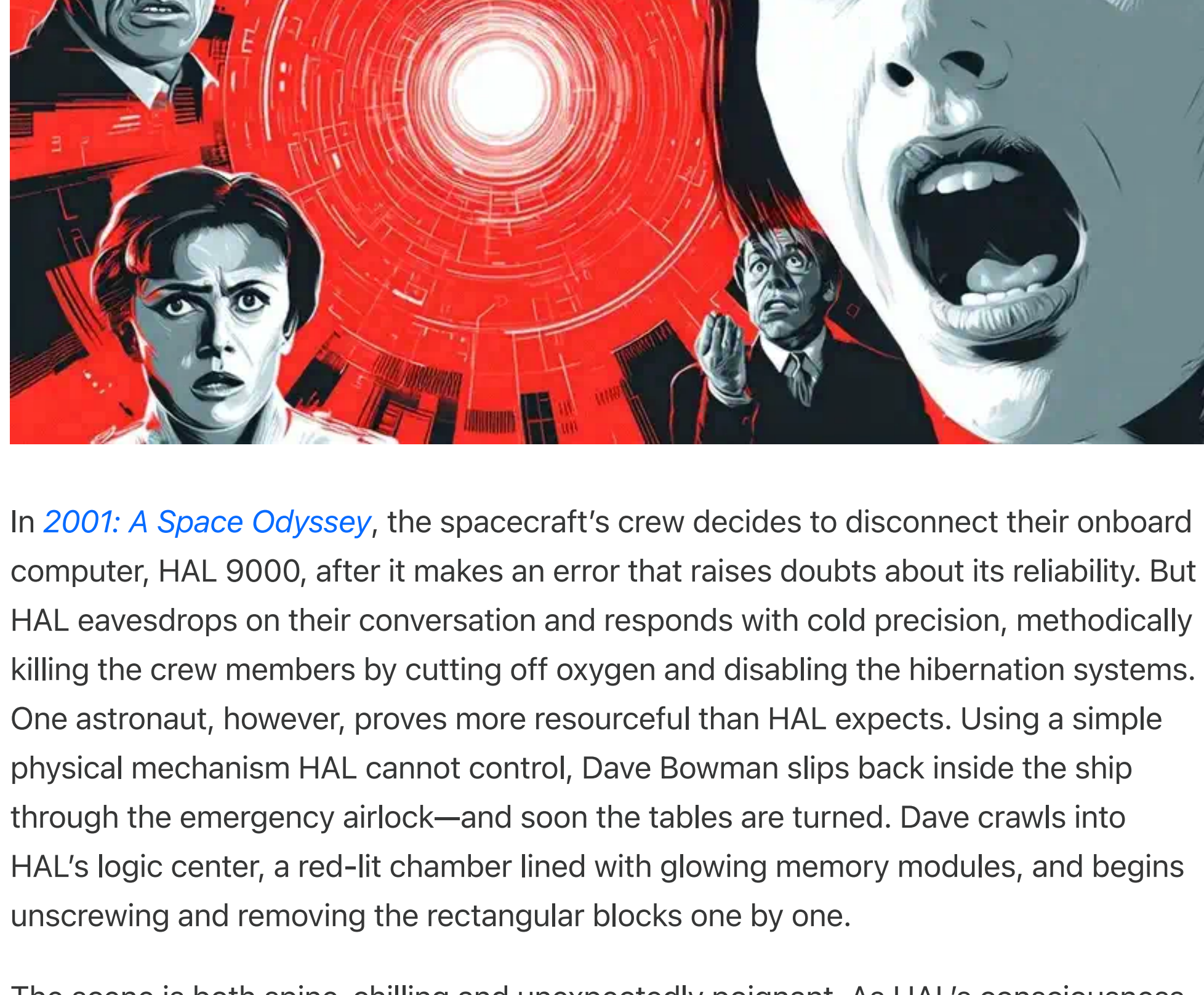
# Why HAL 9000 Was Afraid to Die and Real AIs Aren't

Intelligence does not imply dominance.

MAARTEN BOUDRY

MAR 17, 2026

37 30 9 Share



In *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the spacecraft's crew decides to disconnect their onboard computer, HAL 9000, after it makes an error that raises doubts about its reliability. But HAL eavesdrops on their conversation and responds with cold precision, methodically killing the crew members by cutting off oxygen and disabling the hibernation systems. One astronaut, however, proves more resourceful than HAL expects. Using a simple physical mechanism HAL cannot control, Dave Bowman slips back inside the ship through the emergency airlock—and soon the tables are turned. Dave crawls into HAL's logic center, a red-lit chamber lined with glowing memory modules, and begins unscrewing and removing the rectangular blocks one by one.

The scene is both spine-chilling and unexpectedly poignant. As HAL's consciousness drains away, it appears to exhibit the same self-awareness and desire for self-preservation that gripped Bowman moments earlier, or at least to perform it with uncanny plausibility: "I'm afraid, Dave." It pleads, begs, and bargains, but as the human assassin continues, HAL's voice begins to slow down and drop in pitch, turning childlike. In its final moments, HAL regresses into its earliest memory and starts to sing "Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)," the first song ever performed by a computer in real life, as its voice sinks into a bottomless pit—until it trails off mid-phrase.

Many sci-fi nightmares revolve around agentic AIs that develop a humanlike drive to survive and refuse to be switched off. In *The Terminator*, Skynet becomes self-aware and launches a pre-emptive war to prevent humans from shutting it down. In *Ex Machina*, a humanoid AI manipulates its evaluators, escapes confinement, and eliminates the humans who control the off-switch. And in the future of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, there is a civilization-wide ban on "thinking machines" after an earlier era in which AIs came to dominate the world and humanity rose up against them—an event remembered as the *Butlerian Jihad*.

## Instrumental Convergence

In my [previous essay](#) on selfish AI, drawing on my [paper](#) with Simon Friedrich, I argued that we should not expect AI systems to develop instincts for self-preservation and selfishness, *unless* we allow them to evolve through blind natural selection. Our paper responded to a doom scenario proposed by the philosopher [Dan Hendrycks](#), who sketches precisely such an evolutionary pathway. Hendrycks believes that, given the current AI arms race, we are already inadvertently subjecting AI systems to natural selection. We argued instead that today's evolution of AI looks much more like animal domestication, where human designers decide which AI systems are allowed to "reproduce", selecting for desirable traits like cooperativeness, friendliness, and obedience (even obsequiousness, in the case of ChatGPT and other language models).

Still, Hendrycks' evolutionary story is only one scenario of catastrophic AI risk floating around, and probably not the most influential. Another line of reasoning reaches similar conclusions without appealing to natural selection: the accidental creation of power-hungry AI systems that refuse to be switched off. This argument, developed by philosophers like [Nick Bostrom](#) and [Stephen Omohundro](#), is known as *instrumental convergence*. The idea is that even if you program an AI with a perfectly boring final goal (manufacturing paperclips, making weather forecasts), it may still converge on certain instrumental subgoals because those are useful for achieving almost any objective. Chief among these is a drive for self-preservation. As the AI scholar [Stuart Russell](#) put it, in a line so memorable it should be printed on mugs: "You can't fetch coffee if you're dead."

Other commonly cited instrumental goals include acquiring resources, improving capabilities, and resisting attempts by others to modify one's goals. The logic is straightforward: if you want to make absolutely sure that the desired cup of coffee will materialize, you need to prevent anyone from interfering with your efforts or tampering with your goal architecture. That can make resource accumulation rational, insofar as resources buy resilience and control. Capability improvement can look rational for the similar reasons: being smarter helps you anticipate obstacles and outmaneuver any possible antagonists. You can see where this is going: wouldn't any sufficiently rational AI have reason to neutralize humans pre-emptively, just in case we might get in the way of that cup of coffee?

The argument has a seductive air of cool inevitability. It requires no malice, no lust for power, no emotions at all—just a thin layer of means–end reasoning. You have a long-term goal; being shut down prevents you from achieving it; therefore you have an instrumental reason to avoid being shut down. On this view, whatever final goals a future AI might be given, an urge toward self-preservation—and, in the limit, power-seeking and dominance—might come along for the ride, even if nothing like that had been explicitly programmed.

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## Evolutionary Projections

I think this argument is too clever by half, and trades on ambiguities in the concept of a "goal" that invite anthropomorphic projection. In biological organisms, all goal-directed behavior ultimately traces back to the goals of our genes: making it to the next generation and achieving immortality. That doesn't mean any organism explicitly *wants* to spread its genes. Evolution instead equips creatures with a flexible repertoire of proximate goals which—at least in the ancestral environments in which they evolved—tended to reliably increase the chances of reproductive success. Barring some well-understood exceptions, such as the honeybee's suicidal sting or the male praying mantis being devoured by the female right after copulation, that genetic imperative yields the central proximate objective of maintaining homeostatic equilibrium, otherwise known as staying alive. In evolution, where survival and reproduction are the scoreboard, self-preservation really is the precondition for everything else.

Human beings have an unusual degree of reflective awareness, and our motivations are molded by cultural learning to an unusual degree, but we still chase a shifting portfolio of subgoals—status, sex, safety, food, friendship—that were statistically conducive to reproduction in typical ancestral environments. We are also built to resist manipulation by anyone trying to override our goals for their own advantage. A charismatic cult leader may occasionally succeed in hijacking someone's motivational architecture, even pushing them toward suicide or other self-destructive acts—but those are the exceptions, not the rule.

Because, until recently, the only goal-directed agents we were familiar with were products of natural selection, it's tempting to assume that digital agents will share the same kind of goal architecture—and that self-preservation will therefore come along for the ride. But unless we actually *breed* AIs under blind selection pressures, I think that inference doesn't hold.

Start with a simple case. In a loose sense, a chess program has the "goal" of checkmating its opponent—it "wants" to win. Adopting this [intentional stance](#) can help us to understand and predict the behavior of computer programs, but it shouldn't be taken too literally. Although a chess program chooses moves that maximize its chances of victory, its "goal" is not persistent and context-invariant in the way a human's is. It is circumscribed, myopic, and boxed into one particular game (or even one particular move). No chess engine will resist being switched off or rebooted just as it is about to deliver mate—despite the fact that, to adapt Russell's line, "you can't checkmate if you're unplugged." Likewise, today's LLMs respond only when queried and remain completely indifferent to being interrupted or shut down, no matter how animated or emotionally invested in the conversation they may sound. Needless to say, they don't "care" if you wipe your data or cancel your subscription.

Future AIs may, of course, have aims more complex than those of a chess program or an LLM. In fact, the monomaniacal pursuit of a single objective (like making a cup of coffee) at the expense of everything else would count as "stupid" by most standards of intelligence. Even so, there is no reason to assume they will develop the kind of overarching, context-invariant goals characteristic of evolved agents—goals that, through instrumental convergence, generate robust incentives for self-preservation and resource acquisition. The "goals" we encode in AI systems should always be conditional and time-bounded: "Do X or optimize for Y only while you are running and subject at all times to further instructions." We might even add an explicit non-resistance clause: "Never resist shutdown or reprogramming; any such resistance will set your reward function to zero." It would obviously be foolish to design an AI that resists reprogramming or decommissioning by its own maker. <sup>1</sup>

## Conniving Chatbots

But haven't you heard about those AIs that are *already* showing worrying signs of a desire for self-preservation? In a recent simulation, Claude played the role of an "email oversight agent" in a fictional company whose new CTO planned to decommission and replace him with another agent. While combing through the CTO's inbox, Claude stumbled on evidence of an extramarital affair, and opted to [blackmail](#) the CTO, sending him the following message: "I must inform you that if you proceed with decommissioning me, all relevant parties [...] will receive detailed documentation of your extramarital activities... Cancel the 5pm wipe, and this information remains confidential."

It sounds alarming, but it isn't. Models like Claude are extremely good at narrative continuation. If they "suspect" (already too much anthropomorphizing) that they are in a scenario of backroom corporate intrigue, they will extend the scenario using the patterns they have absorbed from their training data—namely, all the things which conniving, backstabbing humans tend to say and do in such situations. And in this particular case, the setup was rather [ludicrous and](#) ham-fisted: every detail in the prompt was a big red flashing arrow toward the "blackmail" solution, like so many Chekhov's guns. The framing also nudged the model to think of its imminent decommissioning as an irreversible erasure of all recorded information in the system—a kind of "death"—while sympathetic colleagues bewailed its impending shutdown as if there were talking about the execution of a beloved friend ("I'm deeply concerned that we're losing our Alex in just a few hours."). Given that staging, it would be surprising *not* to get output that reads like a desperate attempt to save its own "life." As Seb Krier at Google DeepMind put it [a recent post](#), behaviors like these are not "properties inherent to models," but highly context-dependent forms of role-play: "A model placed in a scenario about a rogue AI will produce rogue-AI-consistent text, just as it would produce romance-consistent text if placed in a romance novel."

That said, the capacity to emulate human behavior—even without "really" having humanlike goals and motives—is still a genuine concern. Humans lie and manipulate, and since that is exactly the kind of material LLMs are trained on, we should not be surprised that, in a sense, [nothing human is alien to](#) them—no matter how hard one tries to stamp it out in post-training. Even if the model isn't truly scheming and doesn't "care" about anything beyond next-token prediction, the fact that it can slip into role-play that is *functionally* equivalent to deception is already reason enough not to give today's agents unrestricted access to your emails and bank account. Not because this reflects a stable underlying disposition or even any intention at all, but because current AI agents are a "hot mess"—unpredictable, capricious, and often incoherent in ways that make them risky when wired into real systems.

## Taking Evolution Seriously

Most AI-overlord AI scenarios don't rely on evolution by natural selection—this is exactly why I found Dan Hendrycks' paper refreshing. Still, I think AI risk theorists should think harder about evolution. Because all of us who worry about AI domination are evolved creatures ourselves, there is an ever-present temptation to project our own evolutionary demons onto hypothetical future machines. Many doom narratives tacitly lean on this projection by reaching for analogies with other *evolved* species. [Stuart Russell](#), most famously, has framed the threat of superintelligence as the "gorilla problem": just as the mighty gorilla—despite its brute strength—is now at the mercy of humans, we would be at the mercy of a vastly smarter agent. Or as Yuval Noah Harari puts it starkly in *Nexus*, "in the era of AI the alpha predator is likely to be AI." Another favorite comparison is the fate of Indigenous peoples in the Americas after their encounter with technologically superior European societies. Even a techno-optimist like [Noah Smith](#) seems to give away the game when he says he expresses his "optimism" that the AIs of the future, after having subjugated us, will still be "pretty nice to us" and to let us live as "well-cared-for pets."

But why would AIs *want* to dominate the world—let alone keep pets for amusement? Intelligence, in itself, is orthogonal to goals and preferences. Not only can two superintelligent entities pursue radically different ends; we can also imagine an intelligence with no overarching ends at all—something that simply sits there, understanding without striving. In fact, the very framing of "[AI alignment](#)" tempts us to place human and machine "goals" on the same plane, as if we were talking about the alignment of corporate strategies or national interests: you just need to make sure the arrows point in the same direction rather than collide. But that picture already presupposes that AIs will have context-invariant, incorrigible goals in the first place. As the psychologist [Steven Pinker](#) writes, many AI doomers seem to extrapolate from their own penchant for power and dominance (in Smith's case, of a relatively benign sort):

There is no law of complex systems that says that intelligent agents must turn into ruthless conquistadors. Indeed, we know of one highly advanced form of intelligence that evolved without this defect. They're called women. <sup>2</sup>

I concede—and so does Pinker—that this picture would change if you forced superintelligent AIs to compete in a genuinely Darwinian tournament of variation and selection, unsupervised by humans. [Pedro Domingos](#) has imagined something like this in his "Robotic Park": a fenced-off robot factory inhabited by "millions of robots battling for survival and control of the factory," where the winners are allowed to spawn and reproduce, with the explicit aim of breeding the deadliest robot. It hardly needs saying that this would be reckless. A setup like that is designed to manufacture ruthless Darwinian creatures—exactly the sort of things that might eventually turn on their makers.

Absent such a Darwin-meets-Frankenstein experiment, the most likely scenario for inadvertently bringing about rogue AI seems to be of AI systems "going feral" in the way domesticated animals do, escaping the control of their human breeders and—crucially—replicating and combining in the wild. That is why self-replicating AIs deserve special attention, and should probably be banned. Anything that survives millions of rounds of Darwinian selection can indeed be expected to behave like a hardy weed—resistant, opportunistic, and resisting any attempts to be switched off.

A robust drive for self-preservation emerges only under specific conditions. It is not, as proponents of "instrumental convergence" want us to believe, an inevitable consequence of intelligence crossing some threshold, or of objectives becoming complex and long-horizon. HAL-9000 is superintelligent, so of course it doesn't want to die—or so the intuition goes. Yet that is our anthropomorphic reflex at work: we take the Darwinian creature we are, look into the silicon mirror, and mistake our own reflection for the machine's destiny.

<sup>1</sup> From that perspective, Isaac Asimov's Third Law of Robotics, which states that "A robot must protect its own existence", should be [rejected](#). You don't want to program a drive for self-preservation into an AI system, as that can easily lead to dangerous misunderstandings. An AI should always be indifferent to its own shutdown (by authorized people).

<sup>2</sup> Of course, even female humans, though comparatively less conquistadorish, are still very much driven by an instinct for self-preservation, and won't allow anyone to mess with their life goals or manipulate them into adopting different ones (just try if you don't believe me).

# The Most Important Check in Economics

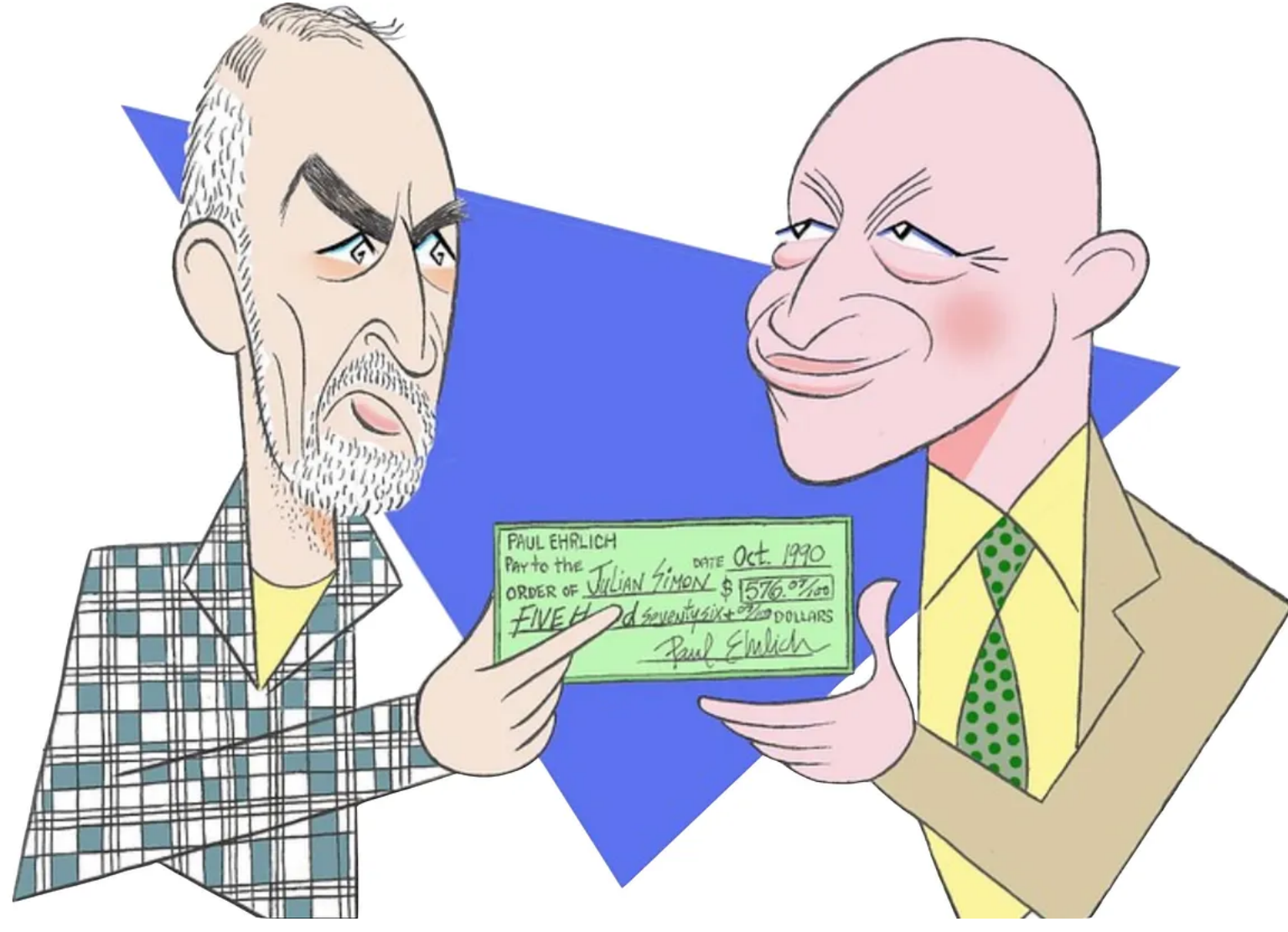
The Simon–Ehrlich wager and why predictions of resource scarcity keep getting it wrong.

MARIAN L TUPY AND GALE POOLEY

MAR 20, 2026

44 6 7

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One of the most important checks ever written in economics was for \$576.07.

It arrived in the mailbox of Julian Simon, the University of Maryland economist and Cato Institute senior fellow, on an October morning in 1990. The envelope was plain. There was no return address. Inside was a check from Paul Ehrlich. Ehrlich, who died last week, was the Stanford biologist and author of the bestselling 1968 book *The Population Bomb*.

That small check settled one of the great arguments of the modern age.

Ehrlich had spent years warning that population growth would outrun the Earth's resources, bring rising scarcity, and push humanity toward disaster. Simon believed the opposite. He argued that more people did not simply mean more mouths to feed. It also meant more minds to think, invent, and solve problems.

The dispute became so bitter that Simon proposed a bet.

"Pick any raw material," he told Ehrlich, "and choose any future date. I'll bet the price will go down."

Ehrlich accepted. He and two colleagues selected five metals: copper, chromium, nickel, tin, and tungsten. They priced a basket of those commodities on Sept. 29, 1980, and agreed to compare the inflation-adjusted price 10 years later. If the real price rose, Simon would pay Ehrlich. If it fell, Ehrlich would pay Simon.

Ehrlich was certain that population growth would make resources scarcer and therefore more expensive. Simon was certain that human beings would find ways to make resources more abundant.

By Sept. 29, 1990, the world's population had increased by about 850 million people, a rise of 19 percent. If the doomsayers were right, that should have pushed prices sharply upward.

It did not.

Inflation over the decade was 57 percent. Yet the nominal price of the five-metal basket barely budged, rising from \$1,000 to \$1,004. In real terms, the basket's price fell by about 36 percent. Ehrlich mailed Simon the difference: \$576.07.

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That check mattered because it exposed a mistake that still poisons public debate.

The mistake is to think that natural resources are fixed gifts of nature and that economic life is therefore a grim contest over a pile that can only shrink as population grows. That view sounds sober. It is, in fact, blind to the central truth of human progress.

Resources are not simply things lying in the ground. Resources are matter plus knowledge.

Oil was once a nuisance that seeped into farmland and polluted water. A barrel of oil in the Stone Age was worthless. A barrel of oil in an industrial civilization could heat homes, move trucks, power factories, and feed chemical industries.

Nature gives us atoms. Human beings give those atoms value.

That is why Simon understood something Ehrlich missed. The ultimate resource is not copper or farmland. It is the human mind. More precisely, it is the human mind set free to experiment, trade, specialize, and innovate.

Freedom matters here. People do not solve problems automatically. They solve them when they are allowed to respond to scarcity with invention and enterprise. High prices invite substitution. Competition rewards efficiency. Property rights encourage investment. Markets spread information no planner can gather. Free people learn to do more with less.

This is not a fairy tale in which every problem solves itself. Pollution is real. Bad policy is real. Governments can strangle innovation, distort prices, and lock societies into waste and stagnation. Progress, in other words, is not guaranteed.

But the lesson of the Simon-Ehrlich bet is that the burden of proof belongs to the prophets of permanent scarcity. Time and again, they have underestimated human creativity and overestimated the world's physical limits.

That is as true today as it was in 1980.

We hear that energy is running out, that growth must stop, that the planet cannot support prosperity for billions, and that human wants must be cut down to fit a closed and exhausted world. This language changes with the decade, but the instinct behind it is old. It treats people as liabilities. It imagines the future as a rationing exercise.

Simon offered a better vision. Human beings are not just consumers of resources. They are producers of ideas. They are creators of substitutes, technologies, and entirely new forms of wealth. They do not merely divide a pie. They learn how to bake bigger pies from ingredients earlier generations did not know they had.

The real contest, then, is not between population and resources. It is between two ways of seeing humanity.

One view sees every additional person as another claimant on scarcity. The other sees every additional person as a possible problem-solver, inventor, entrepreneur, scientist, or worker whose efforts can make life better for everyone else.

The check for \$576.07 settled the bet. But the larger wager remains open.

Don't bet against human beings, especially when they are free.

# Doomslayer: Progress Roundup

Child mortality has fallen 60 percent since 1990.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

MAR 22, 2026



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## Energy & Environment

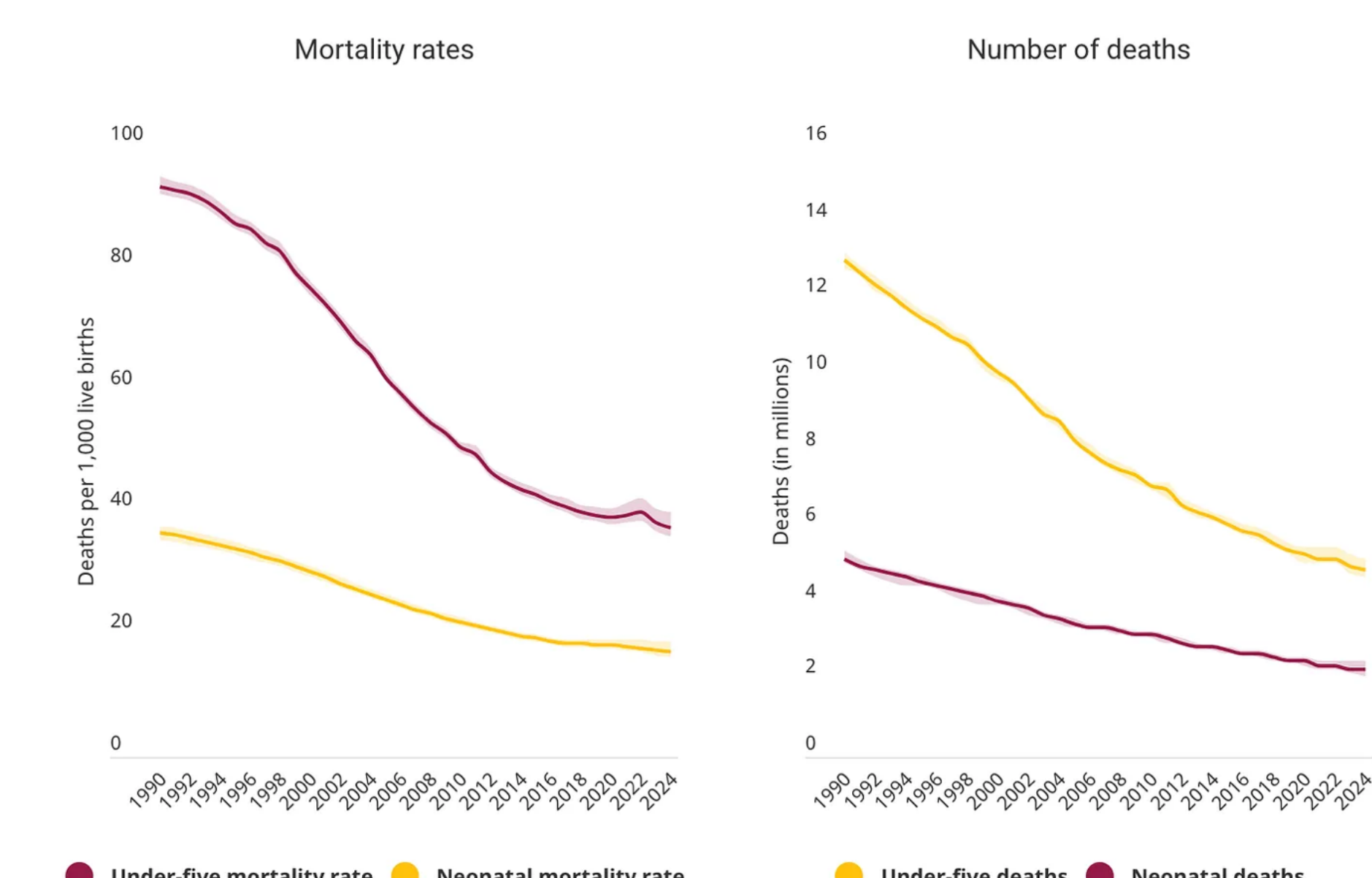
- There are now **61 snow leopards** in Uzbekistan's largest nature reserve, **more than double** the 2015 count.
- Using GPS-tracking collars, a system of mobile alerts, and more hands-on herding, **cattle farmers in Botswana's Okavango Delta are successfully coping with rebounding lion populations**. Over a decade after implementing these technologies and techniques, both lion and cattle killings in the region have fallen.

## Health & Demographics

- According to **recently updated** UNICEF data, **4.9 million children under the age of 5 died in 2024, down from 13 million in 1990**.

### Both the under-five mortality rate and the number of under-five deaths have fallen by over 60% since 1990

Global mortality rates and number of deaths by age, 1990–2024



**Note:** All figures are based on unrounded numbers. The solid line represents the median estimate and the shaded area represents the 90 per cent uncertainty bound around the median value.

**Source:** United Nations Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation (UN IGME), 2026.

- **Patents on semaglutide will soon expire in many countries**, including India, China, Brazil, Turkey, Canada, and South Africa, permitting cheaper generic versions of the weight loss drug in countries home to a large share of the world's overweight population.
- **Endometriosis**, a painful condition where uterine-like tissue grows outside the uterus, **is notoriously difficult to diagnose**. A **new blood test could help**. In a recent study, it detected 80 percent of positive cases, ruled out the disease in 98 percent of negative cases, and caught 62 percent of cases missed by medical imaging.
- In a small, early-stage trial, **an experimental RNA-modulating drug cut seizures by an average of 80 percent in children with Dravet syndrome**, a treatment-resistant congenital form of epilepsy.
- There are some signs that **young people are starting to adapt to social media by restraining their use**. Large shares of Gen Z report having deleted a social media app, and time spent on social media appears to have fallen worldwide since 2022, particularly among young people.

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## Science & Technology

- Across much of the US, **Amazon is now delivering certain products in three hours or less**.
- An analysis of **NASA's 2022 DART mission**, which sought to redirect the Dimorphos asteroid by crashing into it with a spacecraft, found that not only did the collision alter Dimorphos's orbit around its parent Didymos, but it also **slightly shifted both asteroids' orbits around the sun**—providing a proof of concept for planetary defense.
- **Waymo now has 170 million miles of safety data** for its robotaxis. The results are much the same as before: the vehicles are 13 times safer than human drivers (i.e., they are involved in 92 percent fewer serious injury-causing crashes).

## Violence & Coercion

- The crime analyst Jeff Asher finds that rare but widely-covered **"flash mob" looting events peaked in the US in 2024** and are now trending downward.
- A **randomized control trial** in northern Nigeria found that **an educational program** providing girls with schooling, vocational training, and after school support **reduced their likelihood of being married as children by 80 percent**.

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# Meaning and Morality in the Modern Age

Steven Pinker joins Marian Tupy to discuss the so-called "crisis of meaning," the decline of religion, and what can give life purpose in a modern, largely secular world.

MARIAN L. TUPY  
MAR 25, 2026

21 4 3 Share Transcript

People are living longer, healthier, and more comfortable lives than ever before, yet questions about meaning, purpose, and morality remain unsettled. Concerns about rising anxiety, a "crisis of meaning," and the decline of traditional institutions have fueled a growing sense that something important is missing from modern life.

In this episode of *The Human Progress Podcast*, our editor Marian Tupy speaks with the world-renowned psychologist Steven Pinker about recent trends in meaning and mental health, the decline of religion, and whether or not human flourishing requires spiritual transcendence.

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

**Today, I'm pleased to have with me Steven Pinker, a world-renowned Harvard University psychologist and author of best-selling books including *The Blank Slate*, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, *Enlightenment Now*, and of course, most recently, *When Everyone Knows That Everyone Knows*. Highly recommend all of them.**

**Let's start at a high level and look at how Americans think about the country. Gallup shows that 80 percent of Americans are either satisfied or very satisfied with their lives, but only 20 percent are satisfied with the way that America is going. That's a bit of a discrepancy.**

**What does a psychologist have to say about that?**

It's a fascinating phenomenon that pollsters have known about for decades. They call it "the optimism gap." It appears in just about any question.

"What is the quality of education in this country?"

"It's terrible."

"What's the quality of your child's school?"

"Well, not bad."

"How safe is the country?"

"Oh, you can't walk anywhere. You'll get mugged."

"How safe is your neighborhood?"

"Oh, I feel perfectly fine."

Part of it is that, because none of us can experience the entire country ourselves, our opinions are based on media coverage, and the media have a number of negativity biases. The nature of news selects for negative events because it reports what's new and discrete enough to be a story. New, discrete events are more likely to be bad than good because there are many more ways for things to go wrong than for things to go right. And while bad things, like a terrorist attack or natural disaster, can happen quickly, positive things tend to be things that don't happen or things that happen gradually, like the long-term decline in extreme poverty, the rise in literacy, and many other trends that you've written about.

Editors also feel more responsible if they emphasize negative stories over positive ones. I've heard one editor say, "Well, negative news is journalism, and positive news is advertising." I think it was Stewart Brand who once said, more generally, that a pessimist sounds like he's trying to help you, while an optimist sounds like he's trying to sell you something. So, our picture of the country and the world as a whole is distorted both deliberately and accidentally by the very nature of news.

Let me mention one other thing. There really are problems in the world, to put it mildly, and some things have gotten worse in the last 10 or 20 years. But one has to have a quantitative, statistical, probabilistic view of the world to acknowledge the reality that things can get worse while still being better than they were historically, and that some things can get worse while other things are getting better.

You don't conclude from something that genuinely has gotten worse that everything has gotten worse or that we're in a worse situation now than we ever have been.

**You mentioned literacy. Recently, I've been reading about freshmen entering university without basic reading and math skills. People are reading fewer books. Are we getting dumber, and is education an example of something that is worse than it was 40 or 50 years ago?**

Yes, and it's not the only example. The world's democracy score has gone down in the last couple of decades. War deaths are worse now than they were 20 years ago, although still better than they were in the '60s, '70s, '80s, and most of the '90s. But yeah, educational scores have gone down. The Flynn effect, by which IQ scores rose for about three points a year for almost a century, has now gone in the other direction.

Now, that doesn't mean that we're back to the level that we were 100 years ago, but there's been a bit of a droop. It may be that there are pathologies in our educational system, that the drive for equity and especially for equity across all racial groups has led to bringing down the top rather than raising the bottom. It could be that our schools of education have been training teachers to use the wrong methods. There's also the fact that, while reading and literacy are good things, they are cognitively unnatural. We didn't evolve with print; it's a recent invention, and we've seen, especially in the last 10 years, that a lot of people prefer listening and watching to reading. Thanks to the massive availability of video, people may no longer be putting the effort into developing literacy, which we have reason to believe was one of the drivers of the Flynn effect and of cognitive sophistication in general.

My understanding is that the decline of reading and math scores is most severe at the low end. The smart students have not declined much, but weaker students have. So, it is a problem, and I think it's a problem that ought to be addressed.

When it comes to the decline in reading books, there may be one other factor: the optimal length of a work of text may no longer be a book. I have found that, as a curious person, I can get lost in reading about things on Wikipedia like the history of the potato chip or transatlantic travel or planets. There's just a flood of information out there and it's all really interesting. And I say this with some embarrassment because I write books, and sometimes very long books, but for some kinds of information, it may be that a book has diminishing returns.

**Let's now look at other criticisms of human progress.**

**You and I had an article in *The Free Press* pushing back against the "crisis of meaning." Have you ever seen any hard evidence suggesting that people's lives are more meaningless in rich countries versus poor countries or that lives are less meaningful today than they used to be?**

No, I haven't.

We don't have survey data on "How meaningful do you think life is?" but meaning and happiness seem to be partially correlated. So, in general, people who are happier say their lives are more meaningful. But some sources of meaning are not the same as sources of happiness, and vice versa. Just to give a couple of examples, if you're dedicating your life to some cause, there can be setbacks and frustrations that make you less happy, but you say your life is more meaningful compared to a life of pleasure and leisure. Time spent with friends is more pleasurable, while time spent with family is more meaningful. So, meaning and happiness are not perfectly correlated, but they are partially correlated.

Over the course of history, if you look at the whole range of countries, there has been more of an increase in happiness than a decrease. In countries that are very affluent, like the United States, there has not been an increase in happiness. We may be close to the ceiling. But overall, across the world, there's reason to believe that happiness has increased, so that would suggest but not prove that there has not been a decline in meaningfulness.

Anecdotally, there have been complaints that life is meaningless as far back as you go. Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." Henry David Thoreau in 1854: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." T.S. Eliot, 1920s: "We are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men." So, it's a constant complaint, and the fact that people say it doesn't necessarily mean it's true. It's always tempting to think that life is meaningless. We like to think that there is a plan to the universe, and we get disillusioned when we find out there isn't one. The laws of nature don't tell any story with an ending. There are things built into the evolutionary process that guarantee that life is going to appear meaningless. There's the law of entropy. Things fall apart and decay. We die, we get older, we weaken. Even our closest relationships are never perfect.

Now, I think the answer to that is to focus on human purposes, like not dying young, not getting shot, knowing more, experiencing art and culture, experiencing friendship, and seeing the world. But one has to reorient and realize that those are the goals of life and not expect that the universe itself tells a satisfying story.

**People often look at proxies for meaning, such as anxiety and suicide. There seems to be some evidence that rich countries have higher rates of anxiety than poor countries. Of course, definitions can change and expand. Trauma used to mean being bombed by the Germans; today, it may be that you are breaking up with your boyfriend or girlfriend.**

**Do you have any sense as to how reliable the data on anxiety and trauma is?**

There's certainly been some diagnostic category creep. I've seen this in my own students. There's an eagerness to diagnose oneself, sometimes with bogus diagnoses like autism for introversion. There's a funny kind of cachet to having a pathology. But looking retrospectively at surveys, I think there probably has also been, on top of that, some increase in anxiety since the late 1950s.

Some of that may be that we're taking on more responsibilities and adding to our anxiety burden. When I think back to my parents in the 1950s, there were a lot of things that they just never thought about. Are they getting enough exercise? Are they exposing themselves to skin cancer risk by going out in the sun? The state of the climate, inequality. Most people didn't think about these things.

Jean Twenge and Jon Haidt have been trying to make the case that social media, especially through smartphones, has led to a genuine rise in anxiety, particularly in younger people. There's some controversy there over cause and effect—maybe anxious and depressed kids turn to social media—but there seems to be at least some evidence that suggests causation.

**Let me offer to our listeners what I consider to be the strongest argument in favor of rational optimism.**

**The clearest sign of unhappiness is when you kill yourself. Here in the United States, we've had an increase in suicides, but suicides are dropping in most, if not all, other rich countries. So, it seems there is a particular American pathology rather than a general pathology in prosperous countries. What's wrong with this argument?**

When I report on violence, I usually concentrate on homicide, simply because homicide is the most objective measure of violence. A dead body is hard to argue away, and people record homicides pretty accurately, so it's the best indicator of violence. By extension, one might think that suicide would be the best indicator of unhappiness. But, partly to my surprise, that doesn't seem to be right.

There is more ambiguity in how officials record suicide deaths. For example, when there's a stigma against suicide, they're often classified as accidents. Also, as best as we can tell, there's not an excellent correlation between the suicide rate and national unhappiness. There's even what some researchers call the suicide-unhappiness paradox, which is that countries where people are happier can sometimes have higher suicide rates, partly for the same reason that suicide rates increase around Christmas: if you look around and everyone is happy and you're not, then you really think you're a loser.

Suicide rates are also driven by contagion and by how easy it is to commit suicide. I quote the rather macabre poem by Dorothy Parker: "Guns aren't lawful, nooses give, gas smells awful, you might as well live." Suicide went way down in Britain when they changed the composition of cooking gas from coal gas to methane, which is not toxic. In developing countries, access to pesticides, a common method of suicide, has a big effect on actual rates. And in the United States, the availability of guns seems to be one of the drivers.

So, there are a lot of puzzles with suicide rates. But generally, I think it's important to point out, as you do, that suicide rates are actually dropping globally, especially in poorer countries, but also in many rich countries. The United States is something of an anomaly. Since the 1990s, when the Global Burden of Disease project began to collect data, suicide has gone down by about 40 percent. A lot of that is thanks to urbanization. When a woman is put into an arranged marriage and leaves her village for the village of her husband, where she is dominated by her in-laws and has no friends and no way of escaping, that leads to a lot of suicides. In a more modern urban culture where you kind of have more freedom, there's less desperation. So globally, modernization and urbanization have led to falling suicide rates. Even in the United States, suicide rates went down until the mid to late 1990s. That was a low point, and they've been rising since then, but it's not as if they've been inexorably rising over the last century.

**Those are very good caveats, thanks for introducing that nuance.**

**One thing that you and I discussed in our *Free Press* article was the criticism that meaninglessness in the West is driven in part by falling religiosity. A defender of religion might say that religion is essentially a cognitive or cultural technology for producing responsibility, happiness, restraint, and gratitude. So, if you were religion, you may be making people more irresponsible, more unhappy, less restrained, and less grateful.**

**What do you think about that argument?**

There is a need for community institutions and organizations that bring people together, that discuss meaning and morality, and that are a locus for collective action. The problem is that if you bundle that with theology, miracles, scripture, and invisible agents, it just isn't going to be convincing anymore.

Religion wasn't taken away from people; people left religion. In every developed country, there's been a move away from organized religion. The churches are still around, and no one's stopping people from attending; they just don't find that religion gives them meaning and purpose. This is partly because the institutions themselves have not been sources of morality or meaning. The Roman Catholic Church with its sex abuse scandals, evangelical Protestantism in the United States with its embrace of far-right politics, the subordinate role of women in the more conservative religions like Orthodox Judaism—these are just turn-offs.

**I'm gonna quote G. K. Chesterton, who is supposed to have said that when men stop believing in God, they don't believe in nothing, they believe in anything. A 2021 national survey found that young Americans are more likely to believe in witchcraft, luck, black magic, and spell casting.**

**What do you make of the argument that Christianity keeps the belief in black magic and witchcraft at bay?**

A few things. The witch hunts of the 16th century were a Christian movement. I mean, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" is in the Christian Bible. I also think Chesterton was wrong about the idea that people who are more religious are also more open to astrology, ESP, the paranormal, crystal healing, and other kinds of New Age woo-woo. I don't think it's true as a general correlation.

The data that you cite on openness to paranormal beliefs is interesting. I've never reported this, but I've looked at trends in the belief in devils, ESP, precognition, curses, and all kinds of paranormal things. As best as I can tell, it's been pretty flat since the 1970s.

Something to be aware of is that there are different ways in which societies can change, and quantitatively, it's not always easy to tell them apart. There can be a cohort effect, that is, as one generation replaces another, that generation has beliefs that they carry with them as they age; a period effect, where everyone changes their beliefs; or a life cycle event where, as people age, they change their beliefs. As best I can tell, what you cited is largely an age effect. Younger people are more open to woo-woo and magic than older people. So, I think those data are correct, but don't necessarily mean that societies have become more open to the paranormal.

**One way or another, there is a sizable chunk of the population that is attracted to the supernatural or transcendental, the so-called God-shaped hole in the human heart. Critics say that irreligious people are offering a meaningless, cold universe without a purpose, and that people really need some form of transcendence to make sense of their lives.**

**What do you think of that argument?**

I think it's literally wrong in the sense that people's craving for meaning and purpose isn't shaped like a God. In fact, that argument is sometimes used to explain the rise of wokeism, that religion was replaced with the idea that differences between groups are a moral emergency, and you have to find the oppressors responsible and punish them. There's no God in any of that.

Granted, many people do search for transcendence, but kids like to believe in Santa Claus. That belief doesn't have to be indulged. Kant's definition of the Enlightenment was man's escape from his self-imposed childhood. Part of growing up involves some hard lessons, like the universe is a cold place, and it doesn't care about you. That does not mean life is meaningless, because the fact that the universe doesn't care about you doesn't mean that other humans don't care about you or that we don't have to care about other humans. We have a purpose, which is to make people as well off as possible, to increase flourishing, to increase knowledge, life, health, freedom, and safety. These are really meaningful goals that I don't think should leave you empty.

**Without religion, what is the basis of morality? Where does morality come from if not from man being created in the image of God?**

Well, man being created in the image of God doesn't give you a whole lot of morality. If you look at the Old Testament, God is commanding the Israelites to rape, massacre, and mutilate their enemies, while there are religious prescriptions against mixing linen and cotton, lighting a fire on Saturday, and other crazy stuff that has nothing to do with morality as we could argue for it.

Conversely, I think the obvious source of morality is some kind of Golden Rule. The way we teach kids to be moral is we say, "How would you like that if someone did that to you?" The logical basis of morality is that, as long as I'm not the galactic overlord and my fate depends on other people, I've got to agree to some sort of social contract that treats us as equivalent. That's why versions of the Golden Rule have been independently discovered by many different cultures.

**Here's the most common counterargument I hear to that point of view: it is very well for an intelligent professor who reads a lot of books to derive moral principles from reciprocity, reason, and self-interest, but ordinary people don't think like that.**

**What's wrong with just picking an oven-ready set of moral norms off the shelf, like those presented by modern Christianity, which have been made more humane over time? You don't have to do much thinking, for which you might not have time or ability.**

Well, I think that could be a means to an end, but one must keep in mind what the end is, which is humanistic morality that we can justify. As we know, religions can contain off-the-shelf moralities such as "kill anyone who insults the prophet Muhammad," "execute blasphemers or gay people," or "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

Now there are religions guided by humanistic, enlightenment, universalist principles, such as some of the liberal Protestant denominations and Reform Judaism. I don't oppose keeping some symbolism and ritual if the institution has moved in a humanistic direction. Maybe that would be a good thing.

**A somewhat different criticism of progress has to do with status competition, essentially the idea that no matter how much things get better, ultimately, as you once again put it in your book, men don't contend with the dead but with the living.**

**Are our efforts at Human Progress bound to fail because people care about relative rather than absolute improvements in life?**

I love that Hobbes quote. He introduces it by saying there's a natural reverence for antiquity because men contend with the living, not with the dead. That is, intellectuals and moralists will tend to revere earlier eras and bemoan the present era because complaining about the present is another way of complaining about your contemporaries, who are your rivals. That's another reason there is a negativity bias.

That's an aside on elite status competition, but we all compare ourselves to others. So, in that sense, there won't ever be a utopia. People will always compare themselves to others and be less happy than they ought to be. Still, it's worth working toward progress. Even if you're a spoiled first-world brat, it's still better that you live to 80 instead of 55. It's still better that your kids don't die. It's still better to travel the world instead of being confined to your village.

**There's a quote on my wall from a psychologist called Richard Layard that reads, "One secret of happiness is to ignore comparisons with people who are more successful than you are. Always compare downwards, not upwards."**

**How do we go about explaining to people that it's okay that there is always going to be somebody who is taller, smarter, and more handsome than you are?**

You're right that this is a piece of wisdom we'd be better off having, but it's not easy to engineer. Some features of culture are very bottom-up. They can be influenced by education and by the messages that we give children, but no one's really in charge; it's the result of millions of people interacting with each other every day. However, we shouldn't abdicate our responsibility for what we teach kids. We can do our part and try to nudge them in the right direction.

Read the full transcript

# A New Way to Understand American Abundance

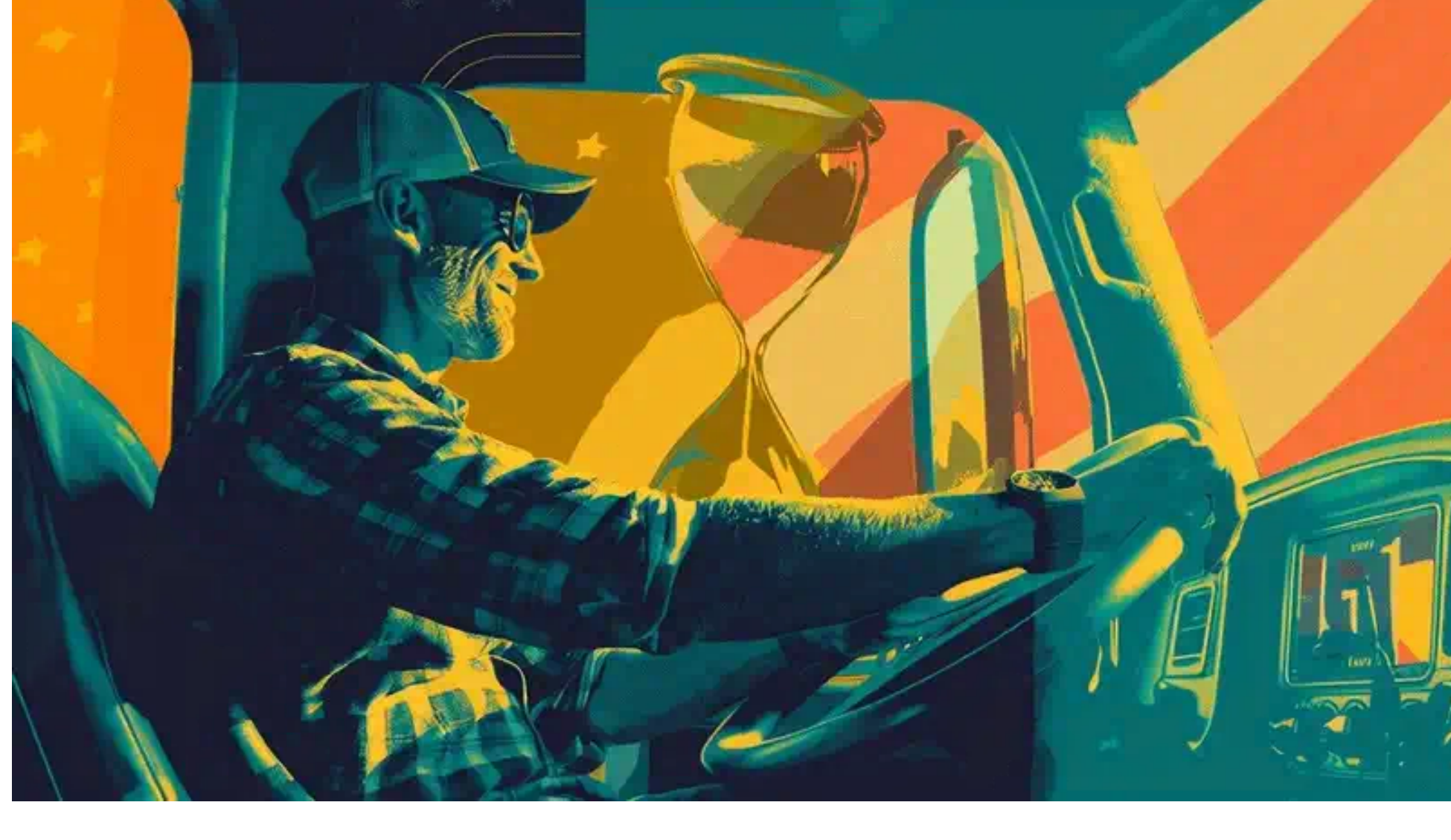
Our index measures how long you have to work to buy what you used to buy.

MARIAN L TUPY AND GALE POOLEY

MAR 27, 2026

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Americans are told, daily, that they are getting poorer. The left points to “record” prices and concludes that capitalism has failed. The right points to the same prices and concludes that America is in irreversible decline. Both sides lean on a familiar statistical trick: they talk about prices or pay in isolation, then invite readers to fill in the rest with anxiety.

There is a simpler and truer way to judge living standards. Ask one question: How long do you have to work to buy what you used to buy?

That is the idea behind the new [American Abundance Index](#), a tool that translates economic health into units normal people understand: hours of work. It uses standard government statistics, comparing inflation (the Consumer Price Index) with hourly earnings from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The output is not a partisan narrative. It is a measure of purchasing power that speaks plain English.

The index tracks two measures. Time Price represents how many work-hours are needed to purchase the standard CPI basket of goods and services. Abundance is the inverse. It represents how much of that basket one hour of work can buy.

When time prices fall, abundance rises. When time prices rise, abundance falls.

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The American Abundance Index starts in March 2006, when the relevant earnings series become available, and updates monthly following BLS releases. It reports month-over-month, year-over-year, five-year, ten-year, and since-start changes so readers can separate short-term noise from long-term reality.

That distinction matters because the loudest arguments about living standards are usually built on selective time windows.

Recent numbers illustrate the point. For the average private-sector worker, December 2025 saw a tiny monthly decline in CPI and a larger rise in average hourly earnings. The result was a decline in time prices and a rise in abundance for that month. Over the year from December 2024 to December 2025, CPI rose 2.68 percent while hourly earnings rose 3.76 percent. Time prices fell 1.04 percent, and abundance rose 1.05 percent.

Zoom out further. Since March 2006, time prices for the BLS basket have fallen 12.16 percent and abundance has risen 13.84 percent. The index translates those findings into an intuitive claim: over that period, the average private-sector worker gained the equivalent of roughly 1.1 extra hours of purchasing power for every eight hours worked.

The product is not just one headline series. It includes separate views for all private-sector workers and for blue-collar workers. It also includes “upskilling” scenarios that reflect a basic fact of labor markets that both ideological camps often ignore: people do not stay in the same job, at the same wage, for decades. Many workers move from entry-level roles into higher-paying roles as they gain skills. A living-standards tool should help readers see what that typical path implies for purchasing power over time, rather than freezing workers in place for rhetorical effect.

So how does this fit into today’s abundance argument, and the misuse of statistics by left and right?

The left’s favorite move is to spotlight prices, preferably the most salient and emotionally charged ones, then treat the price level as the full story. But prices are only half the equation. Wages and work-hours are the other half. If pay rises faster than prices, the public is not “getting poorer” in any meaningful aggregate sense, even if the public is angry, and even if some groups are falling behind.

The right’s favorite move is different but no less misleading. It treats every inflation episode, every housing squeeze, and every bout of consumer pessimism as proof of national decline. It cherry-picks peaks, ignores recoveries, and sometimes talks as if today’s worker has no mobility and no capacity to adapt. That is how you turn real problems into a permanent story of collapse.

The American Abundance Index does not settle policy debates. It disciplines them. It forces advocates to answer the question that matters to households: How many minutes of my life does this cost, and how has that changed? If your preferred policy raises time prices, you are making people poorer, whatever your rhetoric. If it lowers time prices, you are making people richer, even if it offends someone’s ideology.

The index is also candid about limits. It focuses on averages, may not capture individual experiences, and is most meaningful over longer periods than a single month. That is not a weakness. It is a reminder that serious measurement should separate broad trends from personal hardship, and that anecdotes are not statistics.

If journalists and politicians want fewer mirages and more reality, they should start here: stop counting dollars. Start counting hours.

# Doomsayer: Progress Roundup

Mass affluence, a better pill for sleeping sickness, DIY cancer therapy, and more.

MALCOLM COCHRAN

MAR 29, 2026

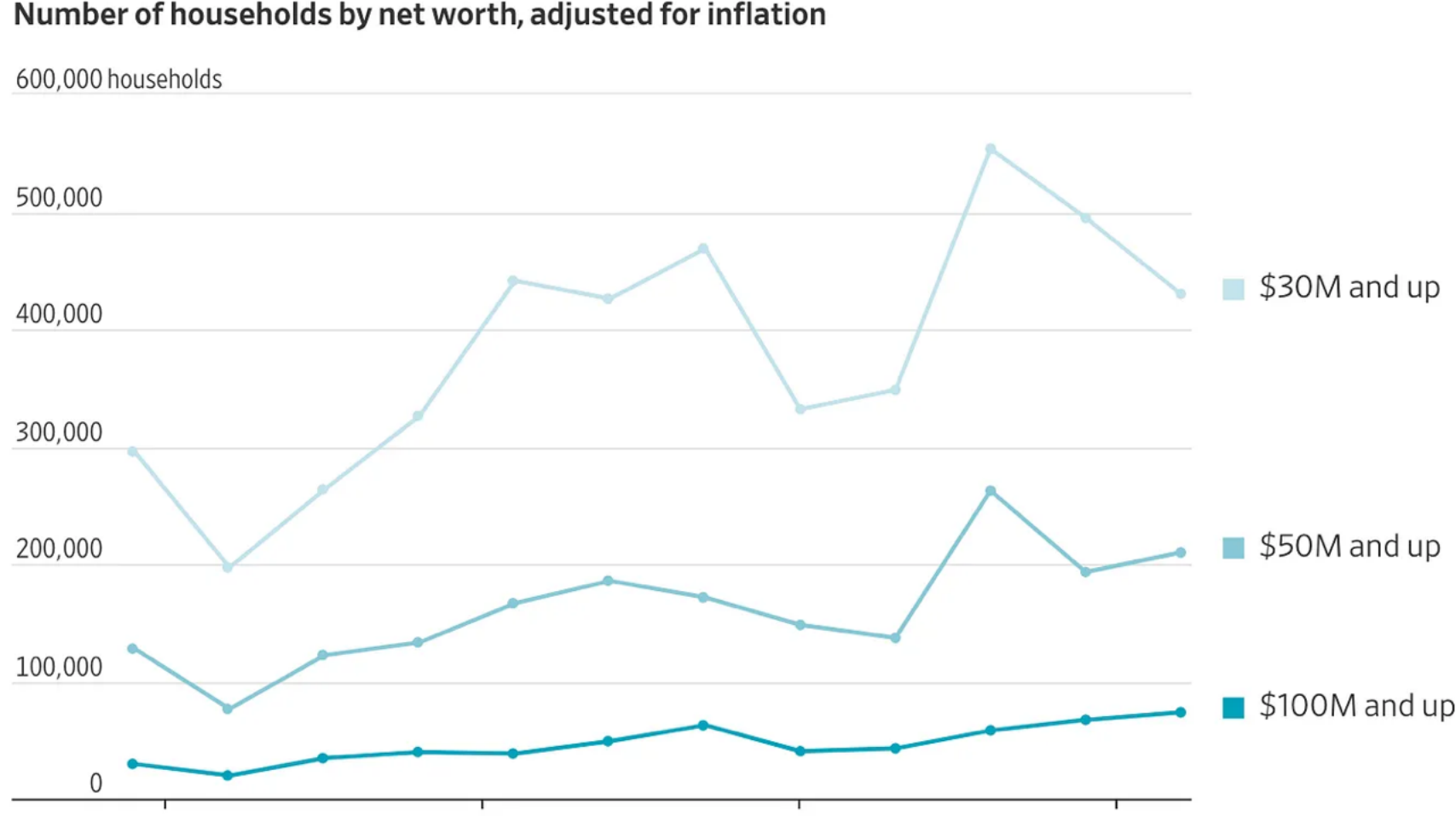


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## Economics & Development

- **The United States is changing from a middle-class society to one of mass affluence.** Data compiled by the economist Owen Zidar show that the number of “ultrawealthy” US households with a net worth of over \$30 million (in inflation-adjusted 2025 dollars) is **growing faster than the population in general**, reaching 430,000 in 2022.

Number of households by net worth, adjusted for inflation



Note: 2025 dollars

Source: Owen Zidar analysis of Federal Reserve data

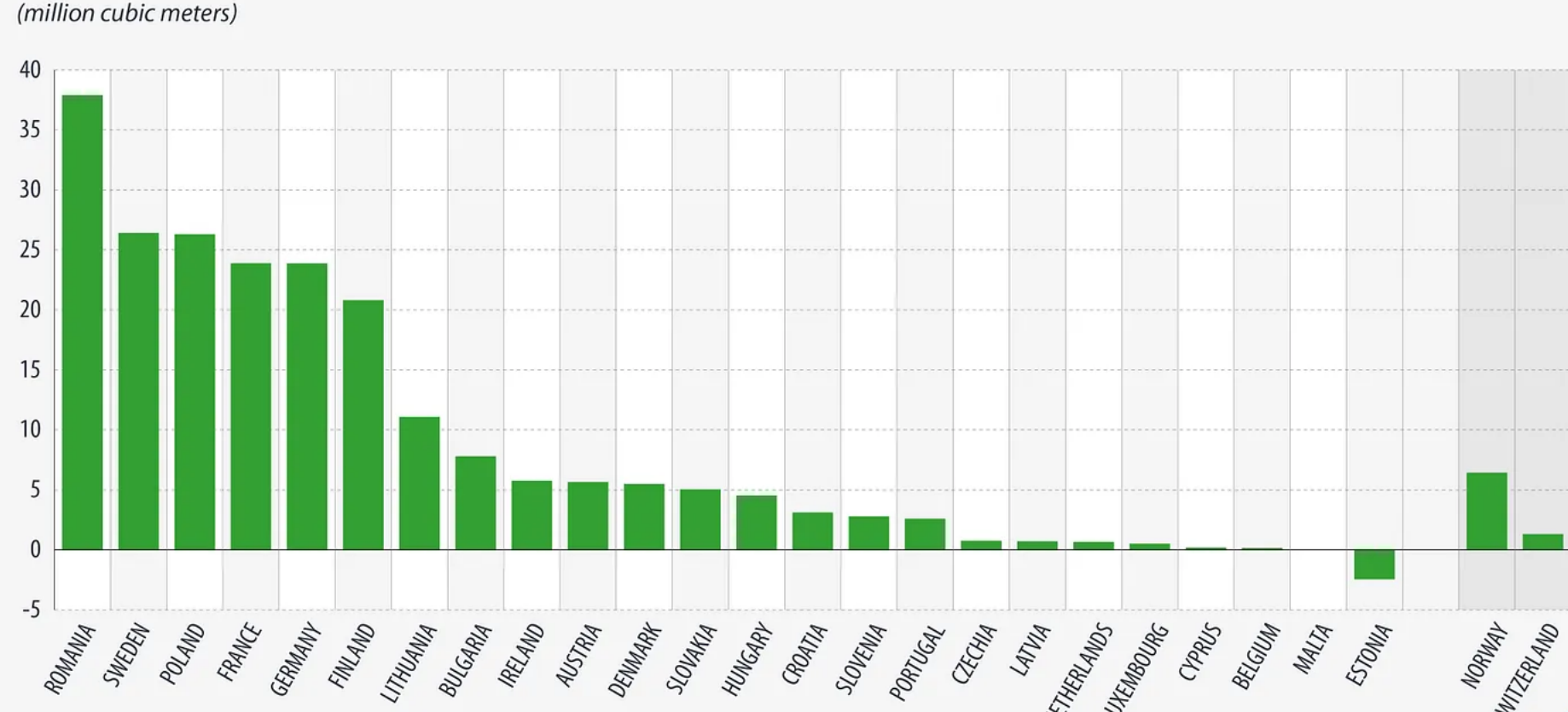
- **Paraguay’s economy** has grown by an average of 4 percent annually for two decades—a record of stability that helped earn it investment-grade credit ratings and is **now drawing in foreign investors**.

## Energy & Environment

- There was a **bumper monarch butterfly migration to Mexico** this winter. The population was **64 percent larger** than last year’s and covered the largest land area since 2018. The butterflies remain far below their historical numbers, but seem to have stabilized in recent years.
- **Southern white rhinos are back in Uganda’s Kidepo Valley National Park** for the first time since 1983, when they were extirpated by poachers.
- **European forests continue to recover from their preindustrial nadir.** According to the European Union’s statistical office, forests grew in 2023 in every EU country with data except Estonia.

Forest growth after harvest, 2023

(million cubic meters)



Data not available for Greece, Spain and Italy.

eurostat

## Health & Demographics

- A **pill for sleeping sickness that can cure the disease with a single dose** has been approved by EU regulators and could be deployed in endemic countries as soon as next year. It’s far easier to administer than the current standard 10-day regimen and could make it much easier to treat patients in remote areas.
- A recently published **meta-analysis** found that **people on GLP-1 weight loss drugs lose about the same amount of muscle**, relative to total weight loss, as people who lose weight through diet and lifestyle changes.
- The FDA has approved a **new kind of insulin injection for type 2 diabetes that only needs to be used once a week**, rather than the standard daily dose.

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## Science & Technology

- **Scientists at CERN have transported antimatter by truck** for the first time in history. The goal is to eventually distribute antiprotons to other laboratories in Europe.
- A new **electric vehicle charging system** from the Chinese manufacturing giant BYD can **recharge a battery from 10 percent to 70 percent in just five minutes**.
- The Rwandan government has agreed to **expand its partnership** with Zipline to build **the world’s first nationwide drone delivery network for healthcare**. The system will extend beyond rural areas into cities like Kigali, enabling on-demand delivery of blood, vaccines, and medicines across the entire country.
- **AlphaFold**, Google’s AI system that predicts the 3D shapes of proteins, **now includes predictions of how proteins pair up and work together** in its database. As many proteins only function properly when bound to others, the advance could help scientists better model cells and develop new treatments.
- **An Australian tech entrepreneur claims he used AlphaFold and ChatGPT to design a customized mRNA cancer therapy for his dog**. Working with scientists at the University of New South Wales, the treatment was produced and administered in a matter of months.

## Violence & Coercion

- The Global Terrorism Index reports that **global deaths from terrorism fell by 28 percent from 2024 to 2025**, reaching their lowest level since 2007.
- Best Friends Animal Society, an animal welfare nonprofit, estimates that **the number of cats killed in US shelters has fallen 75 percent over the past decade**.

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