



## The sky isn't falling

(Published in *The Boston Globe*, December 2, 2007)

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Colaboraciones n° 2093

December 18, 2007

The mail brings the new issue of Commentary, the cover of which announces: "[Crime, Drugs, Welfare - and Other Good News](#)." An arresting title, that, and for a moment you wonder if it is meant sardonically. But no: Authors Peter Wehner and Yuval Levin, scholars at the [Ethics and Public Policy Center](#) in Washington, are playing it straight. On crime, drugs, welfare, and an array of other social problems, they bring tidings of comfort and joy.

Start with crime. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, both [violent crime](#) and [property crime](#) are at their lowest levels since 1973. In some places, even lower: New York City, it was reported a few days ago, is expected to have [fewer than 500 homicides](#) this year, the fewest since the early 1960s. Contrast that with 1990, when

New York recorded 2,245 homicides.

Teenage drug use has fallen by 23 percent since the 1990s, and by more than 50 percent for certain specific drugs, such as LSD and ecstasy.

Welfare? The [US caseload](#) has dropped a remarkable 60 percent since 1994 -- and as much as 90 percent in some states. Not only that, write Wehner and Levin, "but in the wake of the 1996 welfare-reform bill, overall poverty, child poverty, black child poverty, and child hunger have all [decreased](#), while employment figures for single mothers have risen."

As the title promises, the good news doesn't end there. There is less abortion. A lower divorce rate. Higher educational scores. The high-school

dropout rate, now less than 10 percent, is at a 30-year low. Teens are drinking less, smoking less, and having less sex.

To be sure, not all the news is sunny. Illegitimacy is at an all-time high, the marriage rate continues to sink, and popular culture largely remains "a cesspool of violence and vulgarity." Nevertheless, the authors write, "the progress we have witnessed over the last 15 years is impressive, undeniable, and beyond what most people thought possible."

It wasn't all that long ago that the Jeremiahs were in full cry, warning that America was bound for hell in a handcart. In 1996, Robert Bork published *\*Slouching Towards Gomorrah,\** a despondent look at the moral decay and social decline he believed was dragging the nation to a miserable end.

"There are aspects of almost every branch of our culture that are worse than ever before and . . . the rot is spreading," Bork wrote in his introduction. "With each new evidence of deterioration, we lament for a moment, and then become accustomed to it. . . . If we slide into a modern, high-tech version of the Dark Ages, we will have done it to ourselves." Seventeen chapters later, Bork expressed the fear "that perhaps nothing will be done to reverse the direction of our culture, that the degeneracy we see about us will only become worse."

Three years earlier, the social scientist [Charles Murray](#) had written with dread of "the coming white

underclass" being spawned by the nation's ever-higher rates of illegitimacy. (His essay opened with the memorable words, "Every once in a while the sky really is falling.") And three years after *\*Slouching Towards Gomorrah,\** Paul Weyrich, a leader of the Christian right, [wrote sadly](#) that America was undergoing "a cultural collapse of historic proportions" and that he expected the worst: "We are not in the dawn of a new civilization, but the twilight of an old one."

Yet just as some were throwing up their hands in despair, others were noticing that the freefall had stopped. Three days after Weyrich issued his dirge, economist Stephen Moore noted in a Los Angeles Times column that "America is now in the early stages of a remarkable cultural renaissance." He pointed to declines in crime, abortion, welfare, and drug use, and to rises in church attendance, minority income, and charitable giving. "The underlying trends are reassuring," he wrote. "Civil society is making a comeback." Eight years later, as Wehner and Levin show, that comeback continues.

Of course there are some who can never take yes for an answer and for whom the news is always bad. In a new book, *\*Day of Reckoning,\** Patrick Buchanan wails that "America is coming apart, decomposing. . . . We are on a path to national suicide."

Certainly our problems are not trivial. Only a fool would deny that we grapple with considerable chal-

lenges, from the coarseness of American culture to the weakness of the American family.

But the good news of the past 15 years is a reminder that fatalism can be foolish, too. "Problems that may seem intractable at one moment,"

Wehner and Levin write, "can yield, and yield quickly, to the right policies and to a determined citizenry." Decline and decay are not irreversible -- not for a nation blessed, as Americans are blessed, with resilience, resourcefulness, and resolve.