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Opinion | OP-ED COLUMNIST

On Feeling Thankful but Fearful

Paul Krugman NOV. 23, 2017

I'm a little behind the curve here, but it's still Thanksgiving weekend, and it occurred to me that I should make a list of things for which I am personally thankful.

First of all, I'm thankful to have had the privileges that went with being a white male, growing up and building a career during an era — perhaps temporary — in which open anti-Semitism had become socially unacceptable. To my shame, until recently I didn't fully appreciate just how big those privileges were (and at a deep level I probably still don't). I knew that racism and sexism were real and continuing, but was oblivious to just how vicious they were (and are).

I'm thankful to have been born to a middle-class family in a wealthy nation, during an era when the middle class still shared fully in the nation's wealth and social mobility was still high.

I'm thankful to have witnessed a huge improvement in America's environment. This is a much bigger deal, and has made much more difference to the quality of life, than most people realize. But I remember what the air in major U.S. cities was like before environmental protection cleaned them up; the air in New York is still far from perfect, but I've spent time in modern Beijing and New Delhi, and believe me, it's infinitely better than it could have been.

I'm also thankful to have spent my adult life during an era of growing social tolerance. As I said, there's still a lot of racism and sexism out there — far more than, in my obliviousness, I realized. But we're still much more open to diversity of all kinds than we were. Look at the long-term polling on interracial marriage — an issue on which I have a personal stake — and be astonished at how much raw racism still flourished when, say, Ronald Reagan was elected president. Look at the polling on gay marriage and you see a revolution of rising tolerance just since the Bush years.

Or if you prefer pop culture to polling statistics, think about it this way: God used to look like Charlton Heston, but now He looks like Morgan Freeman, and I think this matters.

As someone with an academic turn of mind, I'm thankful to have built a career in a society that valued intellectual pursuits. By the time I entered the work force, the great plunge in working-class wages and economic prospects was getting underway, but wages for the highly educated were still heading up.

And as someone who specialized in a social science that's supposed to be relevant to policy, I'm thankful for the years during which it seemed as if logic and evidence actually mattered, at least a bit, to people in power.

O.K., I'm sure you can guess where I'm going with this. I've had much to be thankful for — but every one of those good things is now very much under assault.

It's true that we're having a moment of awakening on sexual harassment, and it's possible that this will turn out to have been a turning point. But with a self-admitted sexual predator in the White House, it's hard to feel confident.

Meanwhile, everything this president and this Congress are doing on economic policy seems designed, not just to widen the gap between the wealthy and everyone else, but to lock in plutocrats' advantages, making it easier to ensure that their heirs remain on top and the rest stay down.

It's unclear whether the terrible tax bills being advanced by Trump and his allies will go through Congress; but environmental policy is largely set by administrative action, and this administration has been moving with stunning speed to get poisons back into our air and water. Not to mention the growing odds of climate catastrophe.

White supremacists are, of course, making a big comeback thanks to encouragement from the top. (They are, after all, “very fine people.”) So are anti-Semites, which is really no surprise to those who remember their history.

Even as old prejudices return, we’ve clearly entered a new age of politically potent anti-intellectualism. America built its world pre-eminence largely on the strength of its educational system. But according to Pew, 58 percent of Republicans now say that colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country, versus only 36 percent who see a positive effect.

And I don’t believe for a minute that this turn against education is a reaction to political correctness. It’s about the nasty habit scholarship has of telling you things you don’t want to hear, like the fact that climate change is real.

Finally, we’re now ruled by people who have no interest in letting hard thinking get in the way of whatever policies they want to follow. When Congress gets back from its break, Republicans will try to ram through major tax legislation without a single hearing, without giving anyone time for a careful assessment. The result, if they succeed, will be a law riddled with loopholes and perverse incentives, doing nothing for growth but adding hugely to debt. But they don’t care.

In other words, America has given me a lot to be thankful for. But it looks, more and more, as if that was a different country from the one we live in now.

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