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# OPINION

## The miracle of plenty

BY RICH LOWRY

To what do we owe our 20-pound Butterball turkeys, our high-definition TVs, our spacious and warm homes this Thanksgiving? Something that won't be high on anyone's list of things to be grateful for, but undergirds our way of life — a centuries-old economic revolution that changed the very terms of human existence.

In his eye-opening book, "A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World," Gregory Clark produces a chart tracking income per person throughout history. By Clark's account, it is essentially flat from 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1800, reflecting the crushing burden of providing for our material wants in an environment of economic stasis. Then, income per person explodes upward around 1800, coinciding with the Industrial Revolution that first arrived in England. Without it, most of us would still be living poor, nasty, brutish and short lives.

How poor? "The average person in the world of 1800 was no better off than the average person of 100,000 B.C.," Clark argues. "Life expectancy was no higher in 1800 than for hunter-gatherers: 30 to

35 years. Stature, a measure both of the quality of diet and of children's exposure to disease, was higher in the Stone Age than in 1800. And while foragers satisfy their material wants with small amounts of work, the modest comforts of the English in 1800 were purchased only through a life of unrelenting drudgery."

Throughout most of history, Clark argues, humankind was caught in a "Malthusian trap": Small economic advances were outpaced by resulting population growth that made it impossible for living standards to increase. The massive productivity gains of the Industrial Revolution — driven essentially by expanding knowledge — broke the trap and created modern life as we know it.

"The richest modern economies are now 10 to 20 times wealthier than the 1800 average," Clark writes. In these economies, it is the unskilled who have benefited most. "Unskilled male wages in England have risen more since the Industrial Revolution than skilled wages," Clark writes, "and this result holds for all advanced economies." There have always been very rich people. What's changed in the past 200 years is the growth of wealth and its spread.

In his new book "God and Gold: Britain, America, and the Making of the Modern World," Walter Russell Mead picks up the story from a geopolitical perspective. England embarked on its capitalist revolution at exactly the time when "the country that mastered this new system would gather rewards that far outstripped all the treasures of any empire in the past." With that came world power. England reaped the benefits first, then its successor as a superpower, the United States.

And so the miracle that started 200 years ago marches on. "Currently, industrial societies appear to be doubling their rate of technological progress every 10 years," Mead writes. "If this continues, and there is every reason to suppose that it will, the 21st century will experience the equivalent of 20,000 years of 'normal' human progress."

So long as it remains an open and dynamic economy, the United States is positioned to stay at the heart of this progress. Thank goodness for that, and pass the drumstick. ■

Rich Lowry is editor of the *National Review*.

## Shoring up the bedrock



Now that this historic campaign has come to its close and we know the next president, festering uncertainties about the sanctity of the vote mean that the American people stand to lose.

The people will lose because accusations that one side or the other planned to steal the election have become a staple of our recent politics, and these accusations threaten to rob our next president of the full share of legitimacy he will need to tackle our many serious challenges at home and abroad.

On the left, one hears reports of attempts at voter suppression — voter-roll purges that target specific minority groups, threatening and misleading mailers and calls aimed at potential voters in Democratic-leaning areas, and insufficient voting facilities in poor neighborhoods. There is evidence that all these things have occurred in various states during recent elections; this campaign season, there have been charges of misinformation aimed at suppression in key states.

On the right, one hears reports of voter-registration fraud. This election season, the group ACORN is at the center of these charges because it has submitted lists that include some new registrants with highly suspicious names, one of the most egregious examples being "Mickey Mouse." The concern here is that fake registrations could lead to fraudulent votes. It's been pointed out in many places — including the Supreme Court — that studies show scant evidence of people voting under fake names; as some have put it, unless Mickey Mouse actually shows up to vote, it's not a real problem that a worker paid by the number of names he signs up registered Mickey to vote. Nevertheless, those who fear voter fraud might fairly point out that, short of this scenario, cheating would be very hard to detect.

The fears on both sides find traction, and the charges grow, in large part because government has failed to respond satisfactorily and equitably to these concerns. Voting regulations remain a patchwork of state laws. Efforts to address voter suppression often come too late if they come at all. Attempts to prevent registration fraud from becoming voting fraud have often failed to find compromise between protecting the vote and avoiding plac-

ing undue burdens on poor voters.

But nowhere is the lack of action — and the risk to the sanctity of everyone's vote, Republican, Democrat or Mugwump — more evident than with the manifold problems that plague electronic voting machines. Last year, my program "Dan Rather Reports" ran an expose on serious quality-control problems with touch-screen voting machines used by Florida voters in the 2006 election. This week, there have been reports from West Virginia about calibration problems with touch-screen machines there. From calibration, to software, to concerns about the need for a "paper trail" for recounts, questions surrounding the new generation of voting machines ushered in since the 2000 Florida debacle have slowly and steadily helped to erode American confidence in the vote.

This erosion eats into the bedrock of our democracy. It deepens our national divisions at a time of genuine crisis for our country. It is something we should not abide in the best of times and cannot abide at a time of genuine national crisis. The new president may discover that restoring confidence in the vote, perhaps through the study and recommendations of a nonpartisan commission, needs to become a top priority. ■

## MOMENTS IN TIME

• On **Nov. 5, 1930**, Sinclair Lewis is awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. In 1926, he turned down the Pulitzer Prize awarded him, but in 1930 decided to accept Sweden's Nobel Prize.

• On **Nov. 6, 1984**, the New York Stock Exchange decided to keep its doors open on a presidential election day for the first time in 193 years. The move didn't sit too well with traders,

who responded to the news with a chorus of boos and hisses. Fortunately, the Dow did manage to post a 15-point gain on the day.

• On **Nov. 7, 1991**, basketball legend Earvin "Magic" Johnson stuns the world by announcing his sudden retirement from the Los Angeles Lakers after testing positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Today, Johnson is a promi-

nent spokesman for AIDS awareness and a successful businessman.

• On **Nov. 8, 1793**, after more than two centuries as a royal palace, the Louvre is opened as a public museum in Paris. In 1993, a wing once occupied by the ministry of finance was opened to the public. It was the first time the entire Louvre was devoted to museum purposes. ■