

# At least five interesting things: Stubborn optimism edition (#64)

YIMBY<sup>1</sup> wins; America calming down; Biotech miracles; Progress in education; The good kind of nationalism

NOAH SMITH, May 25



Art by @YIMBYLAND

We have a Statue of Liberty on the East Coast; why not build a Statue of Justice on the West Coast? Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay would be the perfect place to build it. In fact, I'm not the first to think of this; *it was suggested in 1963* and rejected. But it's never too late! Now if we can only find someone to build it for us...

Anyway, some readers have been disturbed by the recent pessimistic turn in the tone of my blog posts. While there is admittedly lots to be pessimistic about, especially on the economic front, I decided to do a brief roundup of purely optimistic news.

## 1. More YIMBY victories

A surprising number of online pundits *seem to think* that the YIMBY movement is some kind of perennial failure — a hapless bunch of political naifs that stumbles around making enemies and losing battle after battle. I have no idea *why* they think this, since in the real world, the YIMBY movement keeps gaining support and racking up legislative victories.

For example:

- The Texas legislature looks very likely to *pass a bill* that will allow housing in areas previously reserved for commercial uses. The law *prevents cities* from using various anti-development measures in these cases.
- California is close to passing *one or two major bills to weaken CEQA*, the state environmental permitting act that has been one of the biggest barriers to construction.
- *Texas, Colorado*, and many *other locations* are advancing single-stair reforms, which *will allow* apartment buildings to be built much more compactly, thus increasing housing density in urban areas.
- Cities like *Dallas* and *Santa Monica* are enacting YIMBY reforms — basically, upzoning and eliminating burdensome regulations.

A lot of people really don't like the idea that politics could be rational, nonpartisan, and goal-oriented — that instead of shouting on social media, rioting in the street, vilifying the enemy party, or making

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<sup>1</sup> I checked : Yes, In My Backyard

extremist proposals to “widen the Overton window”, Americans could simply come together through the regular democratic process and implement sensible reforms that help large numbers of people. They expect U.S. politics to just be one giant screeching Twitter battle forever.

But at some point, “let them eat memes” simply doesn’t satisfy. America doesn’t have nearly enough housing, and YIMBYs are the people who are finally doing something about that. No wonder it’s making progress.

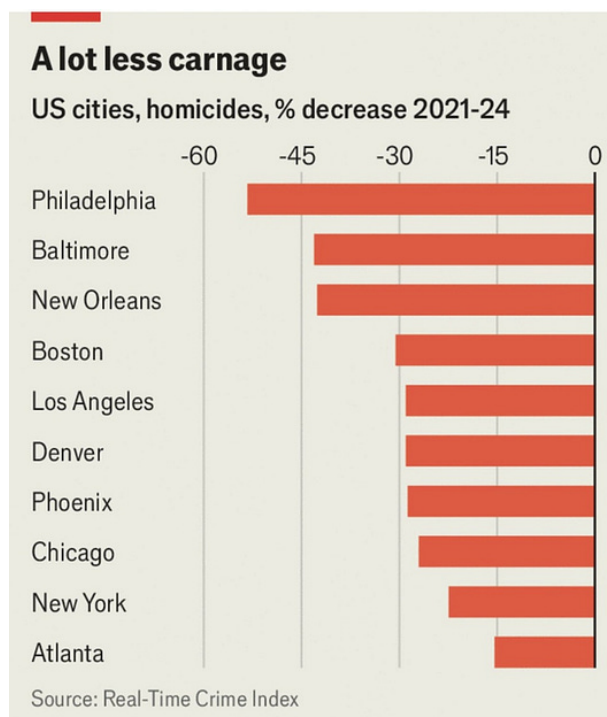
## 2. America is still calming down

One **thesis of mine** that gets a ton of pushback is that while America’s politics and policy have gotten dumber and **more chaotic**, the American people as a whole are calming down from the burst of unrest that lasted roughly from 2014 to 2020.

In fact, I think my thesis is holding up well. Violent crime, which surged in 2020, has been **plunging all across America**:

[C]rime appears to be falling all over America. Jeff Asher, an analyst who compiles a real-time crime index from agency-level records, reckons that this year is on track to be the least murderous nation-wide since the 1960s.

Here’s a chart of how much murder has fallen in select cities since 2020:



Source: The Economist

What about the mass shootings that seemed to happen on a regular basis in the late 2010s? **Those are down too**:

“As of May 10, there have been four shootings in the United States in which four or more victims died this year, compared with 11 at the same juncture last year. It’s the lowest incident count over the first four months of a year since at least 2006, when researchers started the Mass Killing Database, which is maintained by the Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University...The drop builds on year over year data, which shows that mass shootings declined from 39 in 2023 to 30 in 2024...

Last year, three mass killings involving firearms occurred in public settings — at **a market** in Fordyce, Arkansas, a commuter train **outside Chicago**, and a high school in **Winder, Georgia**.

That was down from a record of 10 the previous year. So far this year, thankfully, there have been none.”

Fewer Americans are protesting, too. In 2016 and 2017, Trump’s election was met with massive nationwide protests, which were the biggest in U.S. history up til that time — until they were eclipsed by the even bigger George Floyd protests of 2020. But Trump’s victory in 2024 has prompted few protests, and in general the streets of America are pretty quiescent. Even the Palestine protests, which

were already much smaller than Black Lives Matter or the Women's March, [have dwindled](#). Meanwhile, right-wing brawlers have all but disappeared from America's streets.

Yes, there have been a few spectacular and grisly acts of political violence in America recently, such as Elias Rodriguez, the Palestine activist who [gunned down two people](#) at a Jewish event in Washington, D.C. But this parallels the experience of the 1970s and 1980s; as general unrest fell and most people walked away from the activist movements of the late 60s, the few activists who remained tended to be more extreme, both because of a selection effect and because the extremists had fewer moderates around to restrain them.

So while America's leaders are causing institutional chaos and making radical policies, the country itself continues to feel steadily less unsettled than a few years ago. Ages of unrest don't last forever.

### 3. The Age of Miracles continues

I haven't talked as much about techno-optimism in the past year, but I do think we're still in the middle of a remarkable efflorescence of new technologies. One type of tech I don't discuss much is biotech, but this is really making big strides. Recently, genetic engineering was used to [rewrite an infant's DNA](#) and save the infant's life:

*Doctors say they constructed a bespoke gene-editing treatment in less than seven months and used it to treat a baby with a deadly metabolic condition... The rapid-fire attempt to rewrite the child's DNA marks the first time gene editing has been tailored to treat a single individual, according to [a report](#) published in the New England Journal of Medicine... The baby who was treated, Kyle "KJ" Muldoon Jr., suffers from a rare metabolic condition[.]*

Note that this isn't the standard "superbaby" type of gene editing that's a staple of sci-fi; instead of creating a new human with altered DNA, it's rewriting the DNA of an *existing human being*. Perhaps that means there's hope for you and me!

In other news, pig-to-human organ transplants [are now a reality](#), [cancer vaccines](#) are making [rapid progress](#), cancer rates themselves [are falling](#), and the new GLP-1 weight-loss drugs [appear to have benefits](#) beyond simply fighting obesity.

In general, I'm dismayed by the actions of America's current leaders in the biotech space — defunding the National Institutes of Health, restricting mRNA vaccines, etc. But the march of progress will be hard for a few boneheaded policies to stop. We're still living in an age of miracle and wonder.

### 4. We're making real progress in educating kids

Education often seems like one of the most intractable problems in the world. You can find any number of studies showing that spending per pupil has increased year after year, with little effect on student achievement. (In fact, spending more [does yield results](#), but they're small.) The [stagnation of test scores](#) in the U.S. has prompted some Americans to believe that there's just nothing to be done, and that we've hit the ceiling in terms of how well we can teach people.

A burst of enthusiasm in the 2010s for new educational technologies like online classes ended up fading, as it became clear that these didn't help (or even made things worse).

But there are still a few glimmers of hope. First of all, some U.S. states have been successfully applying [tried-and-true education methods](#) — phonics education, targeted help for kids who are strugg-

gling, etc. — to raise literacy rates and test scores. And most of these states are Republican-led red states! Here's a good post about the trend:



The Education Daly

### Mississippi Can't Possibly Have Good Schools

Painting the Deep South as an embarrassing cultural backwater is one of the last socially acceptable forms of prejudice among elites. It's not just tolerated - it's venerated...

[Read more](#) — 19 days ago · 121 likes · 27 comments · Tim Daly

And here are some excerpts:

"In 2003, only the District of Columbia had more fourth graders in the lowest achievement level on our national reading test (NAEP) than Mississippi. By 2024, only four states had fewer...

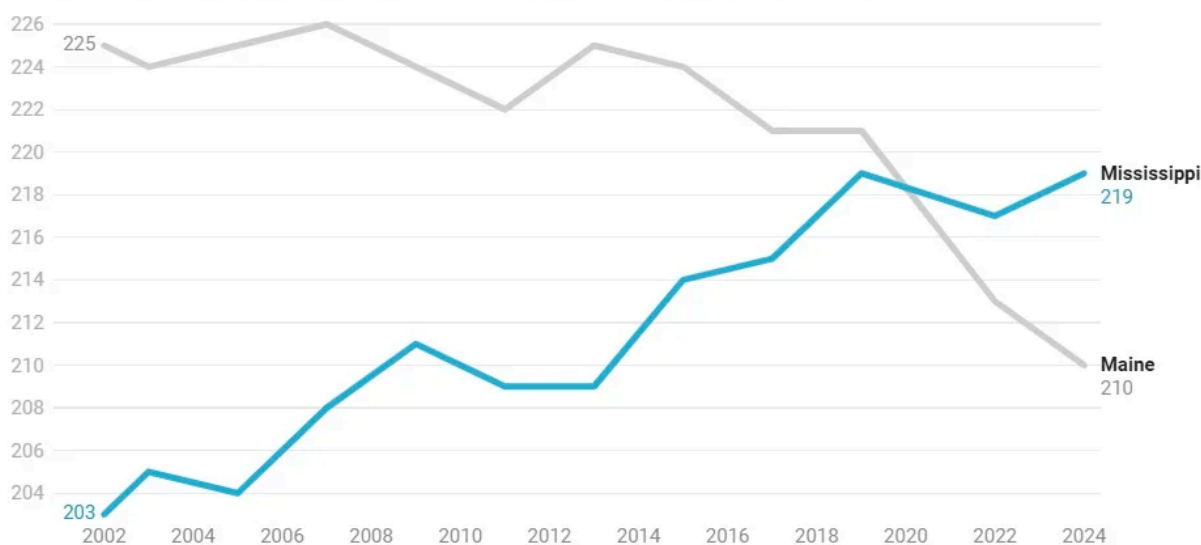
Black students in Mississippi posted the third highest fourth grade reading scores in the nation. They walloped their counterparts in better-funded states. The average Black student in Mississippi performed about 1.5 grade levels ahead of the average Black student in Wisconsin. Just think about that for a moment. Wisconsin spends about 35 percent more per pupil to achieve worse results.

Mississippi has fellow southern stars. Louisiana was the only state to fully erase pandemic learning loss among fourth grade readers. It ranked in the top five for all four NAEP grades/subjects in the demographically adjusted results. Alabama was the only state whose fourth graders beat their pre-COVID performance in math. In years past, notable gains have been posted by Florida, Tennessee and Texas...

This spring, Paul Peterson and Michael Hartney showed that red states (as defined by 2024 presidential election votes) are overtaking their blue counterparts academically. In 2019, blue states had higher average NAEP scores on all four major tests (4th and 8th grade reading and math). By 2024, red states had taken the lead in three of the four.

And here's a good chart:

**Average Fourth Grade NAEP Reading Scores, 2002-2024**



Source: NAEP Data Explorer · [Get the data](#) · [Embed](#) · [Download image](#) · Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Meanwhile, new technology might finally be about to ride to the rescue. **Studies** have consistently **shown** that the most **effective** education **method**, by far, is one-on-one intensive tutoring. But tutoring is very hard to scale up to the whole populace, because tutors are very expensive.

AI has the potential to change that. A good enough AI can act like a personal tutor for every child in the world — a technology right out of Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age*. A team of World Bank researchers recently tested out AI tutors in Nigeria, and **found very big effects**:

Using a randomized controlled trial, the program deployed Microsoft Copilot (powered by GPT-4) to support first-year senior secondary students in English language learning over six weeks...The effect on English, the main outcome of interest, was of 0.23 standard deviations. Cost-effectiveness analysis revealed substantial learning gains, equating to 1.5 to 2 years of 'business-as-usual' schooling, situating the intervention among some of the most cost-effective programs to improve learning outcomes.

That's a really huge effect! Obviously we'll have to wait for replication, but it's incredibly promising. Tried-and-true methods like the ones Mississippi is using can only go so far. If we're going to make education better than it has ever been, AI is probably the answer.

## 5. What the good kind of nationalism looks like

Right now Americans are watching the MAGA movement hurt U.S. manufacturers with tariffs, damage American science with funding cuts and immigration restrictions, and threaten the country's fiscal future with blowout deficits. Gallingly, this self-harm is all being done under the name of *nationalism* and love of country. No wonder there are people out there who view "nationalism" as a dirty word.

But I think Ukraine's experience in the face of Russia's attempted conquest offers us an alternative vision of nationalism. Ukraine's version of nationalism has united the country in mutual defense, instead of tearing it apart with internecine conflict as Trump's variety has. And unlike MAGA "nationalism", Ukrainian nationalism has focused on building up the country's economic and technological strength, instead of tearing up research institutions with ideological purges.

Ukrainian war reporter Illia Ponomarenko recently **had some thoughts** on how the war has rallied Ukraine around a shared love of their nation:

*"You know what the single most profound, far-reaching effect of Russia's war against Ukraine is?... Ukraine has finally learned to truly respect itself... We are a nation that, in just a few years, built from scratch a capable army... To stand up to [Russia] in the biggest war of our time, Ukraine has been sustaining World War I-scale mobilization and made revolutionary breakthroughs in military innovation... Today, Ukraine possesses one of the most capable armies in the world, with cutting-edge, real-time experience in modern warfare—able to resist an enemy that is vastly superior..."*

*We have preserved a democracy and a brutally competitive political life... We're no longer a patchwork "post-Soviet country," split between a "Russian-speaking southeast" and a "Ukrainian-speaking west." We are a united nation. A person from Dnipro and a person from Lviv now share the same values, the same mission, the same grief, the same culture and history — and the same enemy... People from Kharkiv fight the Russian invader just as fiercely as those from Ternopil... And Russia has suffered devastating defeats and drained its once-vast Soviet stockpiles of weapons and ammunition..."*

*You can't imagine how often we still find ourselves saying to each other, half in disbelief: "Can you believe this? Who would've thought our poor Ukraine was capable of this?"*

Ukraine is much smaller than Russia, but its tenacious nationalism and its technological ingenuity have effectively stalemated the bigger aggressor — at least, for now. Ukraine's [drone manufacturing industry](#) has exploded, allowing Ukraine to almost entirely halt Russian advances despite an overwhelming manpower disadvantage. Meanwhile, [Russia's economy is suffering](#).

Ukraine shows that nationalism can be a blessing rather than a curse. Americans who like the idea of one unified nation, fighting and struggling together for a common purpose, should look to Ukraine, not to MAGA.