

morale of the troops under his command collapsed. Recalculating the costs of fighting on, German soldiers decided that the cause was no longer worth risking their lives. In ever-increasing numbers, they began throwing down their arms. The outcome of the war, according to Ferguson, thus reflected the common soldier's willingness to surrender, not the German army's capacity to kill. "It was Ludendorff who delivered the fateful stab," he writes, "and it was in the German front, not the back."

But in dealing with these inherently unquantifiable matters, Ferguson's certitude is misplaced. His explanation—the outcome of a great armed struggle not simply determined but effectively reversed by the momentary lapse of a single individual—is too pat. War, as Clausewitz wrote, lies in the realm of chance, its conduct shrouded by fog and complicated by pervasive friction, a contest pitting governments and armies and peoples against one another, with the verdict determined as much by moral factors as by

material ones. To pretend that a single factor explains the outcome of any conflict is as misleading as to imagine that, having cast the die for war, we can control its course. That was true during 1914–18 and it remains true in 1999, as the surprises and miscalculations of NATO's war against Yugoslavia attest. The closer Ferguson ventures to the Western Front—that is, to the real war—the less persuasive he becomes.

To reaffirm that war is slippery and elusive is not to suggest that soldiers, statesmen, and scholars should abandon their efforts to understand its nature. But we should be wary of reductive explanations that can foster dangerous illusions. Imaginatively conceived and well worth reading, *The Pity of War* makes an important contribution to the vast literature of World War I. But, inevitably, it does not provide the last word on this particular war, much less war in general.

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Contemporary Affairs

MYTHS OF RICH AND POOR:
Why We're Better Off than We Think.
By W. Michael Cox and Richard Alm.
Basic. 256 pp. \$25

Despite the booming economy, declining unemployment, and quiescent inflation, many commentators accentuate the negative. There is still poverty. (An emphatic yes, the worst fault of the American system.) Income inequality keeps growing. (Yes, but almost everyone is better off in today's less-equal system than in yesterday's, which was more equal at a lower level.) The information economy rewards the educated. (Yes, but the same system's prosperity now allows the country to offer higher education to almost everybody.) The economy has intractable and incurable structural problems. (Didn't we just hear that about the federal deficit?) Wall Street might collapse. (Sure, but that would be true even if the economy were weak.)

A few writers, among them Derek Bok, Robert Samuelson, and David Whitman, have

made the case that, for the majority of Americans, living standards—the most important overall gauge of the economy—keep rising. Joining this literature is the impressive *Myths of Rich and Poor*. Cox, an official of the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas, and Alm, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, set out to "provide an antidote to the prevailing pessimism" regarding the economy, and they deploy a profusion of facts and data in behalf of their cause.

Myths of Rich and Poor is strongest where it marshals evidence on the physical betterment of American life—bigger homes, safer cars, dramatically improved health care, abundant (perhaps overabundant) affordable food, easier access to higher education, greater retirement security. Baby boomers often sing the blues about how their parents had a better life in the 1950s, but measured by material standards, nearly everyone is much better off today.

The authors engagingly make this point by estimating how long a typical worker (that is, a

nonsupervisory, hourly wage earner) would need to work in order to afford various consumer goods. A square foot of new house cost 6.5 hours of work time in the 1950s; now it's 5.5 hours. Home air conditioning systems once cost about 40 hours of work per 1,000 BTUs; now it's four hours. The McDonald brothers' original cheeseburger of the 1950s cost a half-hour's wages; now it's three minutes'. A gallon of milk now costs less than half as many work-minutes as it did in the 1950s. And so on. Calculations such as these demonstrate that, judged by buying power, the American economy is serving most citizens well.

Cox and Alm also provide the historical perspective that's often missing from laments about the contemporary economy. Almost half of the economy was agrarian a century ago, and the service sector overtook manufacturing in size not in the 1990s but in the 1930s—facts frequently overlooked by those who think an economy based on a relatively small heavy-industrial sector is unprecedented and spooky. *Myths of Rich and Poor* also contains some hysterical past predictions of economic doom, such as Martin van Buren's 1829 warning that the construction of railroads would end prosperity by undermining the canal system—and, at any rate, “the Almighty certainly never intended that people should travel at such breakneck speeds.”

Where *Myths of Rich and Poor* falters is by equating a high living standard with a happy citizenry. As the University of Michigan researcher Ronald Inglehart has shown, there is surprisingly little correlation between affluence and happiness. Most Americans are better off in material terms than they were even a short time ago, and that's good. But affluence is only one aspect of what really makes human beings rich or poor. Love, community, morality, and spirituality can mean just as much.

—Gregg Easterbrook

THE POLAR BEAR STRATEGY:
Reflections on Risk in Modern Life.
By John F. Ross. Perseus. 208 pp. \$25

THE CULTURE OF FEAR:
Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things.
By Barry Glassner. Basic. 276 pp. \$25

Six men hiking across the Arctic tundra, with one rifle among them, come upon the

tracks of a large carnivore. They argue at some length about what to do. Unable to agree, they do nothing, just muddle onward.

This is the engaging lead to *The Polar Bear Strategy*. Ross is a senior editor of *Smithsonian*, and the book grew out of an article he wrote for the magazine in 1995. The book reflects its origins: it is compact, lucid, insightful, scientifically sound but eminently readable, and written for the layperson.

The author shows that the sources of peril, small and large, are ubiquitous: diet, cigarettes, dioxin, pesticides, road rage, air travel, nuclear power, amniocentesis, even five-gallon buckets (in which about 50 children drown every year). Until quite recently, individuals and society relied largely on the “polar bear strategy”—all worry and argument, but no planning.

Now, though, we often see what Ross terms the “Orwellian side of risk management”—the proliferation of buzzers, fences, and speed bumps; the warning printed on the child's Batman costume (“FOR PLAY ONLY: Mask and chest plate are not protective: Cape does not enable user to fly”). Scientists and regulators have grown so adept at finding risks that risk management now intrudes into every corner of our lives. The intrusions encourage us to cede responsibility, to be passive, to view ourselves as victims.

Swayed by the mass media and advocacy groups, meanwhile, most of us worry too much about insignificant risks while all but ignoring truly substantial threats. The most serious of our biomolecular enemies, Ross notes, originate in our geophysical and biological surroundings: in smoking, bad diet, and our own genetic heritages. We now understand the consequences of smoking and diet. Soon we will possess detailed information about our individual genetic frailties, giving us still greater power to choose and control—a development we can welcome and a responsibility we should embrace.

Glassner's *Culture of Fear* focuses on how public perceptions of risk are shaped. The Batman cape warning appears here too, as do asbestos, breast implants, and airplane crashes. But Glassner is mainly interested in our social aversions. A professor of sociology at the University of Southern California, he contends that mass media, inept experts, and other fear-mongers profit economically or politically from manipulating our aversions. Conservative