

INVESTOR | CONTRARIAN MEAN-REVERSION INVESTING

Jeremy Grantham Made the Bubble Warning a Business Model, Then Had to Survive Being Early



The GMO co-founder turned valuation discipline, mean reversion, and career-risk defiance into one of modern investing's most influential, difficult, and easily misunderstood doctrines.

Sharemaestro Editorial Desk | 30 Jun 2026 | 12 sources | sharemaestro.com

In brief

Jeremy Grantham matters because he built an institutional investment culture around a stubborn proposition: prices matter most when the crowd least wants to hear it. From Batterymarch's early indexing work to GMO's valuation-driven asset allocation, his career has been a long argument against benchmark obedience, speculative euphoria, and short-term client pressure. His record includes celebrated warnings on Japan, the dot-com boom, the housing excess, and the post-2020 speculative surge, but also long periods when his caution looked costly, unpopular, or simply wrong. The useful lesson is not that investors should copy every bearish forecast. It is that valuation, time horizon, behavioral pressure, and institutional incentives cannot be separated.

- Grantham's central idea is mean reversion: assets can trade far above or below fair value, but prices and returns eventually tend to reconnect with long-term fundamentals.
- His influence reaches beyond bearish market calls; he helped pioneer commercial indexing at Batterymarch, co-founded GMO in 1977, and helped make long-horizon asset-class forecasting part of institutional investing.
- The hardest part of his method is not identifying overvaluation, but withstanding the career risk, client withdrawals, and peer pressure that often arrive before mean reversion does.
- GMO's benchmark-free and valuation-sensitive strategies show both sides of the doctrine: they can protect capital in some major drawdowns, yet trail during extended bull markets led by expensive assets.
- Grantham's later career widened his frame from financial bubbles to climate change, resource scarcity, and environmental risk, extending his critique of short-termism from portfolios to capitalism itself.

Performance markers

GMO assets under management in 2014 profile	\$117 billion Institutional Investor described GMO as a Boston-based firm with \$117 billion in assets in its 2014 lifetime achievement profile of Grantham.
GMO assets under management in 2026 Kiplinger interview	More than \$78 billion Kiplinger described GMO as having more than \$78 billion under management in a June 8, 2026 interview with Grantham.
GMO assets during dot-com client pressure	\$31 billion in 1998 to \$20 billion in 2001 Institutional Investor reported that GMO's assets shrank during the dot-com bubble before the firm's defensive positioning was vindicated.
Benchmark-Free Allocation Fund Class IV net one-year return	28.64% Net return for the GMO Benchmark-Free Allocation Fund Class IV for the one-year period ended May 31, 2026, as reported by GMO; the fund disclosure notes one-time items affecting performance.
Benchmark-Free Allocation Fund Class IV net ten-year annualized return	6.96% Net annualized ten-year return for the GMO Benchmark-Free Allocation Fund Class IV ended May 31, 2026, compared with 3.39% for CPI over the same period.
Benchmark-Free Allocation Strategy composite annual return through August 2024	7.6% GMO reported a 7.6% annual return for the Benchmark-Free Allocation Strategy since July 31, 2001 through August 31, 2024, versus 6.1% for a 60/40 blend.
GFC drawdown comparison cited by GMO	-19.3% vs. -35.7% GMO reported that Benchmark-Free Allocation fell 19.3% from October 2007 through February 2009 while a 60/40 blend fell 35.7%.

Charts and timelines

Risk		Timeline	
Timing risk	Can be years early	Batterymarch Financial Management co-founded	New firm
Client and business risk	Assets fell by \$11B	Commercial indexing recommendation	Early indexing claim
Tracking-error risk	Looks wrong before it works	GMO founded	Grantham, Mayo, Van Otterloo
Forecast risk	Not a guarantee	Japan bubble identified	Three years before burst
Narrative risk	Great idea can be bad price	Dot-com pressure on GMO	Assets fell from \$31B to \$20B
		Reinvesting When Terrified	Crisis reinvestment call
		Waiting for the Last Dance	Epic bubble warning
		Let the Wild Rumpus Begin	Superbubble warning

Philosophy		Performance	
Mean reversion	Fair value as long-run anchor	BFAF Class IV net return	28.64%
Career risk	Herding as business logic	BFAF Class IV net annualized return	17.05%
Benchmark independence	Willingness to look different	BFAF Class IV net annualized return	8.65%
Reinvestment discipline	Plan before panic	BFAF Class IV net annualized return	6.96%
Long-horizon risk	Short-termism beyond markets	BFAS composite annual return	7.6%
		60/40 blend annual return	6.1%

The lonely arithmetic of a boom

Jeremy Grantham's career can be read as a recurring scene: a room full of prosperous investors, a market making new highs, and one Englishman in Boston insisting that arithmetic has not been repealed. The tone has changed across decades, from the Japanese equity mania to internet stocks, housing finance, pandemic stimulus, and the current argument over artificial intelligence. The message has not changed much. A high price is not a reward. It is a claim on future disappointment unless future cash flows become extraordinary enough to justify it.

That sounds simple, almost schoolmasterly, which is part of Grantham's strange power and part of his problem. Bubbles do not usually advertise themselves as mistakes. They arrive with productivity miracles, new industries, brilliant founders, falling discount rates, and sophisticated investors explaining why old measures no longer apply. Grantham's gift has been to treat those explanations as data about human behavior rather than as exemptions from valuation. His weakness, or at least his occupational hazard, is that human behavior can keep compounding against him for years.

The result is a career that refuses the easy category of bear or bull. Grantham has warned loudly at peaks and urged reinvestment in panic. He has built a firm around long-horizon expected returns, yet learned repeatedly that clients live in quarterly and annual time. He has been praised as a bubble historian and mocked as a permabear. Both labels miss the more important point: he made being early into a professional discipline, then spent half a century proving how painful that discipline can be.

Why Grantham matters

Grantham matters because his career sits at the intersection of three major shifts in modern investment management. First, he was present near the birth of institutional indexing as a commercial product. Second, he helped build a quantitative, valuation-driven asset manager before factor investing became a fashionable vocabulary. Third, he made asset allocation, not stock picking alone, the stage on which valuation, human psychology, and institutional incentives could be tested.

His influence is therefore broader than a list of famous warnings. GMO's public identity grew from a belief that markets are not continuously efficient, but that inefficiency is episodic, uncomfortable, and most exploitable when business risk is highest. In a field that often rewards confidence without memory, Grantham treated market history as a laboratory. The bubbles of the past were not curiosities. They were precedent files, warnings about the way crowds attach new-era stories to old price excesses.

The importance of that approach is clearest in the modern portfolio world, where institutions often define risk as tracking error against a benchmark. Grantham's career asks a more awkward question: what if the benchmark itself is

the risk? That question has shaped debates over policy portfolios, U.S. equity concentration, growth-stock valuation, quality investing, emerging markets, inflation protection, and the governance problem of committees that can tolerate almost any loss except looking foolish before their peers.

From Yorkshire thrift to Boston quant

Robert Jeremy Goltho Grantham was born in England and grew up with a sensibility that later became part of his public persona: frugality, skepticism, and a habit of distrusting fashionable certainties. After studying at the University of Sheffield and earning an MBA from Harvard Business School, he began his investment career as an economist with Royal Dutch Shell. The official biography is concise, but the outline matters. Grantham entered finance not as a salesman of stories, but as a collector of economic relationships.

By 1969 he had co-founded Batterymarch Financial Management with Dean LeBaron and Richard Mayo. Batterymarch became one of the early laboratories for computer-assisted, quantitative investment thinking. In 1971, according to GMO's own account, Grantham recommended commercial indexing, one of the early claims in the institutional history of index investing. That detail is sometimes lost because Grantham is known as an active contrarian. It should not be. His case for indexing was not a capitulation to market efficiency. It was a recognition that low-cost market exposure could be rational for large institutions even in an inefficient market.

The paradox is revealing. Grantham's later career would be built on exploiting mispricing, but he was early to understand the zero-sum arithmetic of active management before fees. In that sense, he belongs both to the indexing revolution and to the rebellion against benchmark worship. He accepted that many investors should own cheap beta, while arguing that there are rare moments when beta becomes dangerously mispriced. The whole GMO project grew in the gap between those two statements.

The founding of GMO and a doctrine of long memory

In 1977, after leaving Batterymarch, Grantham founded Grantham, Mayo, Van Otterloo with Richard Mayo and Eyk Van Otterloo. GMO would become a Boston-based global investment firm known for institutional clients, quantitative tools, value orientation, and a willingness to look different from benchmarks. By 2014, Institutional Investor described GMO as a \$117 billion firm and a pioneer in international investing, quantitative strategies, and tactical asset allocation. More recent reporting has placed the firm above \$78 billion in assets under management.

The firm's intellectual center was mean reversion. GMO's models began from the premise that asset classes have fair values connected to long-term fundamentals, and that prices can wander far away from those anchors. The idea sounds conservative, but implemented seriously it can be radical. It tells a manager to sell what clients most enjoy owning, buy what they are tired of apologizing for, and hold positions that may be punished for years before the thesis works.

GMO's culture also separated Grantham from the heroic stock-picker archetype. He was not simply searching for one mispriced company. He was trying to measure the relative prospective returns of entire asset classes, countries, styles, and risk premia. That pushed his work into investment-committee rooms, where his ideas competed not only with other managers, but with governance habits. The central enemy was not ignorance. It was the institutional preference for being conventionally wrong rather than unconventionally early.

Mean reversion without romance

Mean reversion is often described as if it were a moral law, but Grantham's stronger formulation is statistical and behavioral. Prices overshoot because investors herd, extrapolate recent returns, and protect their careers. They come back toward fair value not because justice requires it, but because cash flows, competition, capital cycles, and disappointment eventually intrude. It is a discipline of probabilities, not a clock.

That distinction is crucial. Grantham has never possessed a precise timer for collapses, and some of his own writing admits the cruelty of that limitation. The market can be obviously expensive and still rise. Clients can be rationally impatient even when the long-term case is sound. A manager can have the right destination and still lose the business before arrival. GMO's public material repeatedly returns to this problem, arguing that career risk is one of the central forces behind bubbles.

The most useful version of Grantham's doctrine is therefore not simply buy cheap and sell expensive. It is more demanding: define value carefully, accept that valuation works over a horizon that clients may not naturally grant, build governance around the possibility of being early, and size positions so that survival is possible. Without those protections, mean reversion can become a seductive slogan for ruinous stubbornness.

Career risk as the hidden price of valuation discipline

Grantham's 2012 essay on agency problems is one of his most important because it shifts the discussion from market prediction to professional incentives. His argument is blunt: agents who manage other people's money are driven by career risk. They are measured over short periods, compared with peers, and punished more severely for looking different than for sharing in a common mistake. Herding, in this view, is not irrational noise. It is a rational response to institutional survival pressure.

That idea explains why bubbles can become so extreme. The more expensive and fashionable an asset becomes, the more dangerous it is for a professional to avoid it. A benchmark-aware manager who refuses the winning sector does not merely suffer an abstract opportunity cost. They face client meetings, consultant questions, board anxiety, and redemption risk. The price of independent judgment rises exactly when expected returns are falling.

This is the bridge between Grantham the market historian and Grantham the business builder. A valuation-driven firm cannot merely produce forecasts. It must persuade clients to live through discomfort. It must translate long-term arithmetic into committee language. It must sometimes accept asset loss as the cost of integrity. That is why Grantham's career is not a clean triumph of contrarianism. It is a study of the business risk embedded in being publicly, visibly, and repeatedly out of step.

Japan, the dot-com boom, and the cost of being early

The calls that built Grantham's reputation were not all graceful in real time. Institutional Investor reported that he identified the Japanese equity bubble in 1986, roughly three years before it burst. That timing captures the Grantham problem in miniature. To recognize a bubble early is not the same as profiting easily from it. The final phase of a mania is often where the social pressure, benchmark pain, and apparent proof against caution become most intense.

The dot-com period was more bruising because it attacked GMO's business directly. Institutional Investor reported that GMO's assets fell from \$31 billion in 1998 to \$20 billion in 2001 as clients left during the internet boom. Grantham's stance looked increasingly wrong as the S&P 500's valuation expanded. The firm moved money away from technology stocks and toward defensive alternatives such as cash, REITs, and inflation-protected bonds. The decision was later vindicated by the crash, but vindication came only after years of reputational and commercial pain.

That episode is essential to understanding the mythology around Grantham. He did not simply call a bubble from a safe distance. His firm paid for the call before it was rewarded. The episode also hardened his argument that asset allocation is most important at extremes. In ordinary times, relative valuation may add modestly. In bubbles, the decision to step aside can determine whether a client preserves capital or is forced to spend years repairing losses.

The 2008 crisis and the courage to buy

A caricature of Grantham as permanently bearish cannot survive March 2009. In the depths of the global financial crisis, he published *Reinvesting When Terrified*, urging investors to prepare a battle plan and move back into risk assets even when the news still looked black. The point was not that he could identify the exact bottom. It was that

panic creates its own paralysis, and that valuation discipline requires buying when fear makes cash emotionally irresistible.

The timing became one of the celebrated moments of his career. Institutional Investor later called it his greatest call, while noting Grantham's own admission that GMO was not as aggressive as it might have been. That admission is important. Even the investor most associated with long-term valuation discipline found it hard to act fully on the opportunity his own framework identified. The lesson is less heroic and more useful: process reduces fear, but it does not abolish it.

The crisis also showed the symmetry in Grantham's method. Avoiding overvalued assets is only half the job. The other half is reinvesting when prices finally compensate risk. A bubble historian who cannot buy after the bust is merely a scold. Grantham's 2009 letter remains influential because it treated the emotional difficulty of buying as seriously as the arithmetic case for doing so.

The benchmark-free answer

GMO's Benchmark-Free Allocation Strategy is the closest institutional expression of Grantham's agency-risk argument. The strategy was designed to avoid being chained to a conventional policy benchmark when GMO believed the benchmark embedded unattractive prospective returns. Its premise is that fundamental fair value anchors long-term outcomes, while fear, greed, and herding dominate shorter periods. The practical implication is a willingness to own unconventional mixes of assets and to hold them beyond the pain threshold of many competitors.

The evidence is mixed in the way real investment records usually are. GMO materials state that the Benchmark-Free Allocation Fund is actively managed and not managed relative to a benchmark. As of May 31, 2026, the fund's Class IV net returns were 28.64 percent for one year, 17.05 percent annualized for three years, 8.65 percent for five years, 6.96 percent for ten years, and 5.81 percent since its December 2012 inception. The same disclosure warns that returns include one-time contributions from a litigation settlement recovery and proceeds from the sale of certain Russian securities.

The longer composite record illustrates both resilience and opportunity cost. GMO's 2024 asset-allocation analysis reported that the Benchmark-Free Allocation Strategy had delivered a 7.6 percent annual return, 8.4 percent standard deviation, and 0.71 Sharpe ratio since its July 2001 inception through August 2024, compared with 6.1 percent, 9.8 percent, and 0.46 for a 60/40 blend. The same analysis says the strategy tends to trail during extended periods of elevated valuations, a candid admission that valuation sensitivity can look like failure before it looks like protection.

Risk management as refusal and restraint

Grantham's risk management is often described as bearishness, but that understates its structure. The first layer is price discipline: do not overpay merely because an asset is popular, liquid, or benchmark-heavy. The second is diversification across opportunity sets, including international stocks, value spreads, inflation-linked bonds, cash, credit, alternatives, and thematic exposures when valuation supports them. The third is psychological preparation, because no risk model can substitute for an investment committee willing to act under stress.

GMO's own drawdown analysis makes the case in numbers. During the global financial crisis period cited in its 2024 paper, Benchmark-Free Allocation fell 19.3 percent from the end of October 2007 through February 2009, while a 60/40 MSCI ACWI and Bloomberg U.S. Aggregate blend fell 35.7 percent. That is not immunity. It is partial defense. In other periods, including Covid and rate-driven market stress, valuation-aware positioning did not always shine equally. The record resists simple marketing.

The failure mode is just as important. A portfolio that cuts exposure too early can underperform for long stretches. A manager that holds too much cash can create regret. A forecast that correctly identifies poor long-term prospective returns can still be overwhelmed by multiple expansion for years. Grantham's approach manages valuation risk, but it creates career risk, tracking-error risk, timing risk, and narrative risk. The method works only if investors understand

which risk they are choosing.

The post-2020 superbubble call

In January 2021, Grantham published *Waiting for the Last Dance*, arguing that the long bull market since 2009 had matured into an epic bubble marked by overvaluation, rapid price increases, heavy issuance, and speculative behavior. It was a classic Grantham document: historical comparison, valuation arithmetic, behavioral warning, and a frank admission that the final stage of a bubble can be intoxicating. He placed the episode beside the South Sea bubble, 1929, and 2000.

A year later, in *Let the Wild Rumpus Begin*, he escalated the claim. The United States, he argued, was in a superbubble spanning equities, bonds, housing, and commodities. He defined prior superbubbles as rare events that reached extreme statistical deviations and then corrected back toward trend. In August 2022, *Entering the Superbubble's Final Act* added a warning that the market had combined overvaluation with inflation, monetary tightening, commodity shock, and deteriorating fundamentals.

The critique of Grantham's call is not hard to state. Markets did fall sharply in 2022, but U.S. equities later recovered powerfully, aided by resilient profits and enthusiasm around artificial intelligence. That does not render his valuation argument irrelevant, but it does expose the difficulty of applying bubble history to a living market. Grantham's warnings are most useful as risk frameworks, not as trade tickets. The moment they are treated as calendars, they become less reliable than the discipline that produced them.

The AI argument and the old new-era story

By 2026, Grantham's attention had shifted to the artificial intelligence boom, though the intellectual template was familiar. In a Kiplinger interview published on June 8, 2026, he argued that AI was a spectacular bubble comparable to railroads and the internet: a genuinely important technology that could attract too much capital too quickly. That formulation is central to his method. Great ideas can still be overowned. Transformative industries can still produce poor investor returns if entry prices are excessive.

The nuance matters because Grantham is not a technological cynic. His point is not that AI lacks consequence. It is that obvious importance can be dangerous in public markets. When everybody can see the opportunity, capital floods in, expectations harden, suppliers overbuild, and investors begin paying for perfection. The railroads changed economies and still bankrupted many investors. The internet transformed the world and still left the late-1990s buyer nursing years of losses in many names.

This is where Grantham's relevance remains sharp. Every generation believes its dominant technology justifies a new valuation regime. Sometimes the businesses are better than prior analogues. Sometimes margins, network effects, and scale economies do prove more durable than skeptics expected. Yet the burden of proof rises with price. Grantham's warning is less an anti-innovation stance than an insistence that capitalism often transfers the gains of invention to consumers, workers, suppliers, and later entrants, not necessarily to the first wave of euphoric shareholders.

Criticism, limits, and the permabear problem

The criticism of Grantham begins with timing. A valuation bear can be right in the long run and ruinously early in the medium run. The S&P 500 can rise from expensive to more expensive, and clients cannot spend expected returns. Institutional Investor's 2016 profile captured this tension, noting that GMO's approach had been tested during a period when central banks dominated markets and value investing struggled. Grantham himself has said bubbles can go far beyond what seems reasonable in both time and extent.

There is also the risk of narrative overreach. Historical analogies are powerful, but no two cycles are identical. Interest rates, index composition, profit margins, global capital flows, monetary policy, intangible assets, and corporate

concentration can all complicate comparisons with older markets. Grantham addressed part of this in 2017 by arguing that mean reversion in U.S. margins and price-earnings ratios might occur more slowly than in earlier periods. That adjustment showed flexibility, but it also made the doctrine harder to falsify quickly.

The permabear label persists because warning is more visible than nuance. Grantham has made bullish calls, including the 2009 reinvestment letter, and his 2026 comments continued to favor cheaper non-U.S. markets over expensive U.S. equities. Still, public memory is shaped by the dramatic crash warning. The danger for readers is to confuse his reputation with a standing instruction to sell. Grantham's work is better read as a demand to compare price with future return, and to ask who benefits when the crowd stops asking that question.

Climate, resources, and the longer critique of short-termism

Grantham's later career widened his argument from capital markets to civilization-scale risk. The Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment was established in 1997 by Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham. The foundation says Jeremy and Hannelore set its direction, and that its associated trust focuses on reducing and reversing global environmental degradation. Grantham's public climate work earned recognition including election to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, appointment as a CBE, and the Carnegie Medal for Philanthropy with Hannelore.

This was not a hobby appended to an investment career. It grew from the same intellectual root: long-term consequences are discounted too aggressively when short-term incentives dominate. In markets, that produces bubbles and underpriced risks. In environmental policy, Grantham argues, it produces delayed action on climate change, soil degradation, toxicity, and resource constraints. The same human traits recur: extrapolation, denial, agency problems, and the preference for immediate comfort over distant cost.

His environmental warnings have also sharpened criticism. Climate investing can invite accusations of politics, imprecise forecasting, or thematic enthusiasm masquerading as valuation. Grantham's own framework is vulnerable when a long-run truth becomes an investable theme at any price. The stronger lesson is not that every climate-related asset is attractive. It is that investors should not pretend environmental limits sit outside financial analysis. For Grantham, the balance sheet of capitalism includes externalities, whether markets price them early or late.

What remains useful now

Grantham's continuing relevance lies in his refusal to separate valuation from behavior. In an era of index concentration, factor crowding, private-market opacity, and periodic technology euphoria, investors still face the question that has animated his career: what future return is implied by the price being paid today? That question does not supply an easy answer, but it disciplines excitement. It also exposes when a portfolio owns yesterday's winners because the benchmark says so rather than because the expected return is attractive.

The dangerous part of his approach is equally clear. Investors can turn mean reversion into a reflexive bet against innovation, quality, and structural change. They can underestimate how long superior businesses compound. They can hide behind history when the relevant market structure has changed. They can also mistake pessimistic eloquence for portfolio construction. Grantham's career offers no license for lazy contrarianism. The trade must still be sized, diversified, financed, and governed.

The best reading of Grantham is therefore neither hero worship nor dismissal. He is one of modern finance's great witnesses to the pain of valuation discipline. He helped show that bubbles are not merely price events, but institutional events, shaped by incentives, fear, envy, and the business model of asset management. His deepest lesson is austere: the future return of an asset is largely purchased at the moment of entry, and the hardest time to remember that is when forgetting it feels profitable.

Disclosure

Educational financial journalism and market research only. Not financial, investment, trading, tax, or legal advice. Market data and analysis may be delayed, incomplete, or inaccurate.

Sources

SOURCE-01 GMO	Board of Directors: Jeremy Grantham
SOURCE-02 Institutional Investor	2014 Money Manager Lifetime Achievement Award Winner: Jeremy Grantham
SOURCE-03 Institutional Investor	GMO's Mean-Reversion Strategy Is Tested in Today's Market
SOURCE-04 GMO	My Sister's Pension Assets and Agency Problems
SOURCE-05 GMO	Waiting for the Last Dance
SOURCE-06 GMO	Let the Wild Rumpus Begin
SOURCE-07 GMO	Entering the Superbubble's Final Act
SOURCE-08 GMO	Reinvesting When Terrified
SOURCE-09 GMO	Benchmark-Free Allocation Fund
SOURCE-10 GMO	A Second Opinion Is Just What the Doctor Ordered
SOURCE-11 Kiplinger	Investor Jeremy Grantham on AI Stocks, Long-Term Opportunities and the Importance of Patience
SOURCE-12 Grantham Foundation for the Protection of the Environment	About the Grantham Foundation