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Burying the Hatchet

The long, arduous and incomplete process of civilizing humankind and suppressing its most violent impulses.

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By JAMES Q. WILSON

One of the greatest changes that society has experienced over the past several centuries is the remarkable decline in violence. Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University, has undertaken the task of explaining this transformation. He has pulled together an extraordinary range of research and asks us to abandon one of our biases—that yesterday was better than today.

Some facts are not in dispute. There has been a dramatic drop in the homicide rate from the Middle Ages to the present. We know this from detailed studies by archaeologists and by others, such as the political scientist Ted Robert Gurr. Other facts are in dispute: Was the 20th century—with two world wars, the perfection of genocide and the use of forced starvation as a way of compelling political assent—"the bloodiest in history"?

You would think so. World War II took 55 million lives. In China, Mao Zedong killed 40 million of his own people. In the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin murdered 20 million of his. World War I added an additional 15 million to the death lists. The total is 130 million dead bodies. But Mr. Pinker argues that this figure, as ghastly as it is, does not tell the whole story. The more important consideration, he suggests, is what fraction of the living were put to death.

The Mongol conquests of the 13th century, begun by Genghis Khan and his followers, took an estimated 40 million lives. But that number, when adjusted for the size of the target area's population, is the equivalent of 278 million killed in the middle of the 20th century—more than double the real total. The annihilation of American Indians by war and disease is said to have claimed 20 million lives, but if you adjust the loss to a 20th-century base, it amounts to 92 million dead.

Does it make any sense to adjust deaths to the size of the population in the mid-20th century? Yes, up to a point: If, in 1700, 50 people in a village of 500 residents were killed in a war, the death rate was obviously 10%. The same death rate applied to the 9/11 attacks on the United States would mean that three million (not 3,000) people died. Clearly a 10% death rate would have been vastly more serious had it occurred in 2001.

But in other ways the current population makes little difference. In a village of 500 people, everybody would know, and many would be related to, the 50 who had died. The desire to fight back against the aggressor would have been strong; allies would have been available; and motives would have been powerful. When 3,000 Americans died on 9/11, the country was shocked and angered, but the great majority of us did not know the victims; our response was assigned to the government; and our motives, though strong, lost force as time passed.

Mr. Pinker does not suggest that we regard 3,000 deaths from terrorism as trivial because they were exceeded in that year by the number of people who died as a result of falls, homicides, accidental poisoning and traffic accidents. If death totals were a major issue for the public, we would close our roads, ban poisons and put a police officer on every street corner. Mr. Pinker rightly notes that the goal of terrorism is not only death but panic, and panic was

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caused by 9/11.

The view that primitive people were "noble savages"—as Rousseau, among others, argued—collapses under the weight of Mr. Pinker's analysis. The Atlantic slave trade, for instance, run in Africa by Africans, resulted in the death of 18 million people: One third died while being captured in Africa, an additional seventh during the ocean crossing and a final third while being "seasoned" on arrival in America. No need to adjust those numbers to the size of the population in the 20th century.



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A 1939 photograph by Weegee (Arthur Fellig) of murder victim David 'the Beetle' Beadle lying dead on a New York City street.

It is better, I suspect, not to argue about whether the 20th century was especially bloody. We should focus, as most of Mr. Pinker's book does, on why the violence that ordinary people inflict on one another has gone down so sharply. Mr. Pinker looks skeptically at several theories and notes that only one survives his analysis. It is a theory that helps to explain why the people who crowded into big cities, living anonymous lives amid class conflicts and coping with the Industrial Revolution, experienced fewer, not more, homicides. "As Europe became more urban, cosmopolitan, commercial, industrialized, and secular," Mr. Pinker writes, "it got safer and safer." How could this have happened?

The Better Angels Of Our Nature

By *Steven Pinker*
 Viking, 802 pages. \$40

He supports the argument of Norbert Elias about the civilizing process. Elias, a German-Jewish sociologist who died in 1990, traced in careful detail how European views of bodily functions, table manners, sexual behavior and casual violence were transformed by a process of inducing shame and self-restraint. What began as court etiquette ended up as "the right way to behave" for ordinary people. Manuals of etiquette were widely studied, not to make certain that one could avoid picking the wrong fork at dinner but to guide one's moral conduct. Erasmus, the great Dutch thinker of the 16th century, wrote "On Civility in Boys," and it proved to be a best seller for two centuries. It taught boys how to become men by learning to control their appetites, delay their gratifications and consider the sensibilities of others.

For this transformation to happen, government had to exist, because some ruler had to care about how his subjects behaved. And the state had to enforce moral rules with criminal penalties if the rules were to have a lasting effect. The rise of kings and the decline of minor aristocrats changed the political and cultural order.

Take France. For centuries it was a place where outside powers (the Romans or Germans) established outposts, and wars were fought with England and other neighbors. Then French kings began to take control, culminating in the rule of Louis XIV. He created the palace at Versailles, a gilded cage that every French nobleman had to inhabit, at one time or another, in order to know the king's orders and to learn of financial opportunities. At Versailles (and at similar palaces in other countries) the preoccupation with manners was a way of keeping rivals busy. But it advanced the idea of rules governing conduct. And as it turned out, it fostered a kind of rule-learning that improved the skill of warriors for the modern armies that were then being created.

Thus the civilizing process got under way, but it was uneven, occurring sooner in some countries (such as England) than in others. Elias did not take into account something that reinforced the civilizing process, and that was trade. Raising cows to feed your family is simple but barely rewarding; raising cows and selling them to a person in another county or even another country are complicated matters, but they can be very rewarding. As Mr. Pinker notes, trading surplus goods instead of simply feeding yourself with what you have hoarded changes life: Now you view your trading partner as someone more valuable to you alive than dead. The late anthropologist Ernest Gellner argued that the big social change occurred when men decided to get rich rather than bloody. Getting rich requires consent; being violent requires the opposite, an animus against others.

During the Nazi era, a "de-civilizing" process occurred. Yet the creation of modern people and the support of decent governments, generally speaking, had their effect. A map of the world with countries shaded by their homicide rate shows that Canada, China and Western Europe have low murder rates, while much of Africa and much of South America have high ones.

This fact raises the interesting question of why America's murder rate, though it has fallen sharply in recent years, is still so much higher than that of England. Mr. Pinker's answer is clear: One must compare the regions of the United States with England. The homicide rate of

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New England is almost exactly the same as that of England, and in our far-north states, such as the Dakotas and the Pacific Northwest, it is even lower. But in Louisiana and most of the South it is much higher. The civilizing process never penetrated the South as it did New England. Instead, a culture of honor, a weak police tradition and a shortage of penitentiaries left Southerners with only personal violence as a way of defending themselves, a system that affected both whites and blacks.

Throughout "The Better Angels of Our Nature" Mr. Pinker defends the Enlightenment—that is, the reliance on human reason to make choices and shun intolerance. Along the way he criticizes the anti-Enlightenment thinking of the romantic left. In various eras, anti-Enlightenment thinkers have argued that humans can only be understood as parts of groups; that humans participate in no universal human nature; that war is essential because, it is claimed, it improves people.

Perhaps Mr. Pinker's most important statement is, so to speak, the one he doesn't say. As an evolutionary psychologist, he generally incorporates heritability into his explanation of human behavior. The claim might thus be made that people have become genetically less disposed to violence. But Mr. Pinker's careful attention to the evidence will not let him say this. We have, as yet, no reason to think that our biological make-up has changed in a way that makes us less violence-prone.

Alas, when Mr. Pinker departs from his customary close attention to facts, he writes some strange things. For example: George W. Bush "infamously" supported torture; John Kerry was right to think of terrorism as a "nuisance"; "Palestinian activist groups" have disavowed violence and now work at building a "competent government." Iran will never use its nuclear weapons. Mr. Pinker dislikes Mr. Bush because he is "unintellectual." In fact, Mr. Bush never took an IQ test, but he did take the SAT and the armed-forces qualification test. Converting those scores to IQ, Mr. Bush turns out to be brighter than Mr. Kerry, whom Mr. Pinker admires though he got lower grades in college than did Mr. Bush.

Mr. Pinker's casual remarks on matters that he has not studied are no reason not to study "The Better Angels of Our Nature." It is a masterly effort to explain what Mr. Pinker regards as one of the biggest changes in human history: We kill one another less frequently than before. But to give this project its greatest possible effect, he has one more book to write: a briefer account that ties together an argument now presented in 800 pages and that avoids the few topics about which Mr. Pinker has not done careful research.

—Mr. Wilson is the author of "The Moral Sense" and teaches at Pepperdine University and Boston College.

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