

A Propaganda Windfall for the Imperial State: Steven Pinker on the Decline of Violence

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Steven Pinker's new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, is a propaganda windfall for the leaders and supporters of the U.S. imperial state, currently engaged in multiple wars, with over 800 military bases across the globe, asserting and using the right to kill untried "terrorists" any place on earth and still operating a torture gulag abroad and a record-breaking and abusive prison system at home.

It is not surprising that the *New York Times* greeted the book so warmly, with a flattering front-page Sunday book review by the philosopher Peter Singer, who called Pinker's tome "supremely important" and a "masterly achievement" (October 9, 2011), along with other positive responses.

It reminds me of the welcome given Claire Sterling's *The Terror Network* in 1981, a book that fit so well with the Reagan administration's attempt to demonize the Soviet Union, with the Soviets allegedly behind the world's terrorists (who included Nelson Mandela and his ANC, as well as any other resistance movements in the Third World). Sterling's book was an intellectual disaster and fraud (see the critique in my *Real Terror Network*), but it was lauded by Reagan era officials and very respectfully treated in the mainstream media.

Pinker works the same track as Sterling. He swallows whole the old "containment" model in which U.S. policy from 1945 was designed to limit the expansionism of the Soviets and China ("The Cold War was the product of the determination of the United States to contain this movement [of the two great Communist powers] at something close to its boundaries at the end of World War II"). Even the huge Vietnam war death toll was, for Pinker, a result of the "fanatical" unwillingness of the Vietnamese to surrender to superior force. ("The three deadliest postwar conflicts were fueled by Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese communist regimes that had a fanatical dedication to outlasting their opponents.") This is pretty crude apolo- getics for aggression and mass killing.

There is a major problem for Pinker in the brute facts of a massive postwar global expansion of the United States, its immense military budget, all those bases, NATO's steady enlargement, and its taking on of "out of area" responsibilities, all despite the disappearance of the main power allegedly needing containment (the Soviet Union).

In three major books during the past decade (*Blowback*, *Sorrows of Empire*, and *Nemesis*) analyst Chalmers Johnson has featured, at length, our "continuous military buildup since World War II and the 737 military bases we maintain in other people's countries"; the fact that "blowback," including events like 9/11, is a response to imperial expansion and violence, and that "more than in most past empires, a well-entrenched military lies at the

heart of our imperial adventures.”

Pinker deals with Chalmers Johnson and his ilk by the application of the “preferential method” of research, which is his *modus operandi* across the board. That is, he never mentions Johnson and never addresses his facts and arguments. He also never cites Andrew Bacevich, another outstanding and experienced analyst who gives a lot of weight to the power of the military-industrial complex (MIC), its costliness, blowback consequences, and its threat to a democratic order.

There is a string of other quality analysts on militarism, old and new, who Pinker avoids, including Gordon Adams, Richard Kaufman, Nick Turse, Thomas Carroll, William Blum, Robert Higgs, Ivan Eland, Winslow Wheeler, Miriam Pemberton, Frida Berrigan, William Hartung, and Catherine Lutz. None of these appear in Pinker’s fairly detailed index.

Pinker prefers James Sheehan, whose theme in *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone: The Transformation of Modern Europe* is that Europeans have changed their very conception of the state and made the state “no longer the proprietor of military force,” but rather “a provisioner of social security and material well-being” (Pinker’s summary). But the soldiers are still there, NATO is still expanding, and it and modern Europe are contributing soldiers to the Afghan war and were heavily involved in warfare in Libya and elsewhere. Furthermore, Europe’s social security systems have been under attack for years and the well-being of ordinary citizens seems to be a declining objective of Europe’s leaders, as well as those in the United States.

But for Pinker, Sheehan’s theme, even if misleading, is worth stressing, as it is an excellent substitute for discussing the growth and power of the MIC. Books like Johnson’s—which tell us that the institutional forces related to the MIC overwhelm the “better angels”—are unacceptable to Pinker, so he ignores them and won’t debate the issues at stake. As Chalmers Johnson says, when facts are too indigestible “ideological thought kicks in.” It does with Pinker. In one section of his book titled “Recent Biological Evolution?,” Pinker raises the possibility that the alleged trend in declines in violence that he purports to document have been products of the natural selection for less violent traits among specific populations of the human species, concentrated in recent centuries in geographic regions defined (roughly) as Western Europe and the United States. That is to say, those parts of the world where the “civilizing processes” of strong central states, liberal democracy, capitalism, open markets, trade, literacy, the Enlightenment, human rights activism, and the like, have come to dominate, so that peace is taking over because of the strengthening of the “better angel” elements of human nature.

Oddly, and curiously, although Pinker clearly is friendly to this notion of a limited natural selection taking place among certain advantaged parts of the human population in the geographic regions just mentioned, he concludes this section of his book by dismissing it on the basis, not that he doesn’t believe it, but that in the final analysis, he doesn’t need it. “Since it is indisputable,” he writes, “that cultural and social inputs can adjust the settings of our better angels (such as self-control and empathy) and thereby control our violent inclinations, we have the means to explain all the declines of violence without invoking recent biological evolution. At least for the time being, we have no need for that hypothesis.”

This line of argument has other amusing features. Pinker says that “another historic

upheaval in the landscape of 20th century values was a resistance by the populations of the democratic nations to their leaders' plans for war" and he spends a fair amount of space describing the growth of peace movement activism in the 1960s and in advance of the war on Iraq. Contradictorily, elsewhere in his book he blames the 1960s movements for their "decivilizing" impact, perhaps inadvertently acknowledging that these protesters were trying to stop Pinker-approved—i.e., own-country— wars. Pinker notes that in the 1960s the peace movement helped elect Nixon, who "shifted the country's war plans from a military victory to a face-saving withdrawal (though not before another 20,000 Americans and a million Vietnamese had died in the fighting)."

This is his evidence on the anti-violence effectiveness of those peace movements. Note also that a million Vietnamese "died in the fighting." Apparently there were no Vietnamese civilians killed by direct assault rather than fighting in battles. Elsewhere in this book, Pinker is explicit that "at least 800,000 civilians died in battle" (*italics added*; referencing Rudolph Rummel's estimate of 843,000 civilian battle deaths).

In the end, despite that great triumph in getting the "peace-driven" Nixon into office, Pinker fails to explain why elites were then, and still remain, little influenced by the masses marching in the streets who are displaying the growth in spirit of the "better angels." Why must the masses even march in the streets? Why must the elites continue to engage in military buildups and serious violence at heavy economic cost when, according to his preferred expert James Sheehan, the state is abandoning military force and focusing on the material well-being of the public? If institutional forces are not the explanation why don't the "better angels" trickle up to the leadership?

Actually, as noted, Pinker does explain that the United States has been "containing" the big bad states. He claims that in recent years we have only engaged in little wars, largely against the "uncivilized." In Iraq, "the interstate phase was quick, [and] most of the deaths in Iraq were caused by intercommunal violence," obviously not our fault and death counts are usually inflated by biased folks like the veteran analysts who produced two consecutive estimates of "excess mortality" rates in Iraq for the British medical journal the Lancet in 2004 and 2006.

Furthermore, although the top leaders (inexplicably) may still not be reluctant to go to war, in the lower ranks a new civilian-loving ethos has taken over. Pinker spends considerable space on the new Marine Code of Honor catechism, the Ethical Marine Warrior whose principle is that Marines must protect not only themselves and allies, but "All Others." Pinker says that even if this is only "an aspiration," it is a great innovation (which is not true: Army Codes have long been full of rules regularly ignored). He takes this claim of the new aspirational morality at face value, with further stories and quotes from Marines on their devotion to "all others." Needless to say, Haditha and Falluja do not show up in Pinker's index.

In the 18th century, Dr. Samuel Johnson said that, "When I take up the end of the web, and find it pack- thread, I do not expect, by looking further, to find embroidery." As the illustrations here suggest, readers of Pinker's pretentious work will not find enlightenment there.

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