



# BOOK REVIEW OF STEVEN PINKER'S: "THE BETTER ANGELS OF OUR NATURE: WHY VIOLENCE HAS DECLINED"

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**Editor's note:** *This article is too large to fit into any one of our issues. But, due to its importance, we have decided to run it as a three part series. The first of these, below, features the introduction, the beginnings of Block's critique of Pinker (2011) and the appendix. Part II, to appear in our third issue, contains most of the main body of this work. And the last appearance of this essay in three parts, in our fourth issue, will contain the author's conclusion and his voluminous bibliography.*

## Part I

### I. INTRODUCTION

This is a magnificent book. It was a joy to read. I learned something new and important on practically every page. But before I begin my very critical review,<sup>1</sup> in the interests of full disclosure I must reveal my initial prejudices, which were all wildly in favor of Steven Pinker.

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First, I am very grateful to Prof. Pinker for these publications of his: Pinker (1994, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2008, 2011). This author is a world renowned socio-biologist, and I am a strong devotee of this school of analysis.<sup>2</sup> Second, on a personal note, I am very appreciative of him because he was kind enough to adopt this book of mine (Block, 2008) for classroom use in a course at Harvard he team taught with Alan

<sup>2</sup> I am a mere student of this field. My only article in sociobiology is Eckhardt, Robert, John Levendis and Walter E. Block. Unpublished. "Sociobiology, economic freedom, trade and benevolence."

<sup>1</sup> Very, very, very critical review

Dershowitz.<sup>3</sup> Third, when then Harvard president Larry Summers was subject to abuse for speculating that male-female differences in representation on the faculties of mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc., might be due to biological divergences (Saletan, 2005), Steven Pinker was one of the very few of his colleagues to rise to his defense. I regard this as an important contribution to the goal of academic freedom.

Pinker is a masterful writer. I read his book three times, in its entirety, and he had me at the edge of my seat on all occasions. His humanitarian sentiments come shining through. He hates with a palpable passion people hurting people and that does him great credit. I have never met the man, but I like him very much for this. I highly recommend this book of his. I have attempted a full frontal assault on it, however, because I regard the state as the greatest rights violator known to our species, and this book, from one end of it to the other constitutes an apologetics for this evil institution. Perhaps I have totally misconstrued what he says, for I conclude that he is really not on the side of the angels despite much evidence to the contrary. No one can be a total "good guy" who defends statism so well and so enthusiastically.

**What is the thesis of Pinker (2011)?<sup>4</sup>** There are two:

1. Death due to violence is numerically *less* in modern times than in earlier days
2. This happy pattern is due to the rise of government, particularly democracy

As can be readily seen, the second of these two claims are in direct contradiction to anarcho capitalism or radical libertarianism. This is the philosophy that sees government not as a savior, but as an outright criminal gang. For example, states Rothbard (1988): "...the State is nothing neither more nor less than a bandit gang writ large." This book of Pinker's, then, can be interpreted as a shot across the bows of the good ship libertarian. Nor does his criticism of free enterprise come from the pen (well, word processor) of a lightweight. In my view Steven Pinker is at least the intellectual equal of other critics of Rothbardian libertarianism such as James Buchanan, Ronald Coase, Richard Epstein, Milton Friedman, Robert Nozick and Gordon Tullock.

Let us take each of Pinker's theses in turn:

1. Death due to violence is numerically *less* in modern times than in earlier days

When I first heard this claim, my mind went immediately to the 20<sup>th</sup> century in general, and, in particular to World War II. Surely, this was the bloodiest experience of mankind, I thought. And, in a sense, my immediate response was correct: 55 million poor souls perished in that conflagration, the most of any one episode. But Pinker has a strong defense against this criticism; he considers not the absolute number of deaths, but rather their number relative to the overall population of the world at the time they occurred. When this is done, an absolute death toll of 55 million ranks only 9<sup>th</sup> in his calculations (195). Thus, we see, that 20<sup>th</sup> century losses of life have an adjusted rank of only 9<sup>th</sup> (Second World War), 11<sup>th</sup> (Mao), 15<sup>th</sup> (Stalin), 16<sup>th</sup> (First World War), 20<sup>th</sup> (Russian civil war), and 21<sup>st</sup> (Chinese civil war). The really horrendous losses on a per capita basis occurred during these centuries: worst of all, 8<sup>th</sup> (An Lushan revolt), second worst, 13<sup>th</sup> (Mongol conquests); third worst, 7<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> (mid East slave trade), fourth worst, 17<sup>th</sup> (Ming Dynasty), and fifth worst, 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> (fall of Rome).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This course, "Morality and Taboo" was given during the spring 2007 semester: [http://141.164.133.3/exchange/walterblock/Inbox/Re:%20Pinker,%20Defending.EML/1\\_multipart\\_xF8FF\\_2\\_Morality%20and%20Taboo%20syllabus.pdf/C58EA28C-18C0-4a97-9AF2-036E93DDAFB3/Morality%20and%20Taboo%20syllabus.pdf?attach=1](http://141.164.133.3/exchange/walterblock/Inbox/Re:%20Pinker,%20Defending.EML/1_multipart_xF8FF_2_Morality%20and%20Taboo%20syllabus.pdf/C58EA28C-18C0-4a97-9AF2-036E93DDAFB3/Morality%20and%20Taboo%20syllabus.pdf?attach=1).

<sup>4</sup> All otherwise unidentified page numbers will be to this book alone.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix at the very end of this essay for a replication of Pinker's table (195). If there were only 100 people on earth, and Cain killed Abel, there

Pinker calculates the number of deaths proportionate to the total world's population. But the so-called World War I and World War II didn't really involve entire world. If we placed in the denominator only the total population in Europe for WWI and only those populations directly and even indirectly involved in WW II, we would reach a far different conclusion than Pinker's.

Consider next the U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan.<sup>6</sup> States Rose (2012):

"*The Mail on Sunday* today reveals shocking new evidence of the full horrific impact of US drone attacks in Pakistan. A damning dossier assembled from exhaustive research into the strikes' targets sets out in heartbreaking detail the deaths of teachers, students and Pakistani policemen. It also describes how bereaved relatives are forced to gather their loved ones' dismembered body parts in the aftermath of strikes.

"The second case is being heard in the city of Peshawar. In it, Mr. Akbar and the families of drone victims who are civilians are seeking a ruling that further strikes in Pakistani airspace should be viewed as 'acts of war'.

"They argue that means the Pakistan Air Force should try to shoot down the drones and that the government should sever diplomatic relations with the US and launch murder inquiries against those responsible.

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would be a stupendous, gigantic death rate per year per 100,000 persons. But there would only be one murder. This puts a further bit of perspective on Pinker's decision to consider deaths per capita.

<sup>6</sup> These drone attacks have been much in the news since the horrendous attack on school children in Newton, Connecticut (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/9749559/Connecticut-school-shooting-Barack-Obamas-Sandy-Hook-vigil-speech-in-full.html>);

Obama's tearful regret of these senseless killings at Sandy Hook have been called hypocritical in view of his own mass murder of Pakistani children. See on this Grigg, 2012; Shaffer, 2012. See also <http://www.lewrockwell.com/blog/lewrw/archives/128745.html>

"According to a report last month by academics at Stanford and New York universities, between 2,562 and 3,325 people have been killed since the strikes in Pakistan began in 2004."The report said of those, up to 881 were civilians, including 176 children. Only 41 people who had died had been confirmed as 'high-value' terrorist targets."

According to Friedersdorf (2012):

"Obama terrorizes innocent Pakistanis on an almost daily basis. The drone war he is waging in North Waziristan isn't 'precise' or 'surgical' as he would have Americans believe. It kills hundreds of innocents, including children. And for thousands of more innocents who live in the targeted communities, the drone war makes their lives into a nightmare worthy of dystopian novels. [People are always afraid](#). Women cower in their homes. Children are kept out of school. The stress they endure gives them psychiatric disorders. Men are driven crazy by an inability to sleep as drones buzz overhead 24 hours a day, a deadly strike possible at any moment. At worst, this policy creates more terrorists than it kills; *at best*, America is ruining the lives of thousands of innocent people and killing hundreds of innocents for a small increase in safety from terrorists. It is a cowardly, immoral, and illegal policy, deliberately cloaked in opportunistic secrecy. And Democrats who believe that it is the most moral of all responsible policy alternatives are as misinformed and blinded by partisanship as any conservative ideologue."

These two authors provide quite an indictment of the U.S. drone policy. In sharp contrast, here is how Pinker deals with this challenge to his thesis:<sup>7</sup>

"Where an army previously would have blasted its way in to the militants' hideouts, killing and displacing civilians by the tens of thousands as it went, and then ultimately reducing whole towns and villages to rubble with inaccurate artillery and aerial bombing in order to get at a few enemy fighters, now a drone flies in and lets fly a single missile against a single house where militants are

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<sup>7</sup> Pinker (266) cites Goldstein (2011)

gathered. Yes, sometimes such attacks hit the wrong house, but by any historical comparison the rate of civilian deaths has fallen dramatically.”

I have to admit it, this author has a point. Who would have thought that there could be *any* coherent defense of this murder of the innocents from the skies?

Having praised Pinker, well, provisionally, it is now time for criticism. First, some overall criticisms, which permeate his entire book.

1. He does not confront libertarian critics.<sup>8</sup> He cites about 900 publications in his tightly written book of 802 pages. His bibliography lists 1955 entries. He does address numerous other actual and potential critics of his perspectives, but never anarcho-libertarian ones. Pinker mentions the virtues of democracy scores of times; no, maybe, hundreds of times. But he has no room for dealing with Hoppe's (2001A) *Democracy - The God That Failed*.<sup>9</sup> Pinker complains of the evils of

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<sup>8</sup> I don't say for sure that these libertarian critics would have prevailed over Pinker, although I think that would indeed have been the case; for more on this see below. My complaint, here, is only that in almost completely ignoring them, Pinker (2011) is far less satisfactory than it would otherwise have been. Surely, a publication that makes such controversial claims almost owes it to its readers not to limit itself to straw men opponents. According to Mill (1859, emphasis added) "The greatest orator, save one, of antiquity has left it on record that he always studied his adversary's case with as great, if not with still greater, intensity than even his own. What Cicero practiced as the means of forensic success, requires to be imitated by all who study any subject in order to arrive at the truth. He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that. His reasons may be good, and no one may have been able to refute them. But if he is equally unable to refute the reasons on the opposite side; *if he does not so much as know what they are*, he has no ground for preferring either opinion. The rational position for him would be suspension of judgment, and unless he contents himself with that, he is either led by authority, or adopts, like the generality of the world, the side to which he feels most inclination."

<sup>9</sup> Pinker never tires of reminding us of the evils of Hitler, and of the greatness of democracy. However came to power through an entirely democratic process, not via a coup de etat. Therefore, there is a tension

anarchy on more occasions that you can shake a stick at, but completely ignores anarchist libertarian publications such as Hoppe (2001B).<sup>10</sup>

The name "Murray N. Rothbard," the dean of anarcho capitalists, appears nowhere in this book. If I had a dollar for every time Pinker reminds us of the Wild West in the U.S. I would be a moderately rich man, but one searches in vain for Anderson, T.L., Hill, P.J. (1979). "An American experiment in anarcho-capitalism: The *not so wild, wild, west*."<sup>11</sup> Pinker announces himself as a Hobbesian all throughout his book.

Does he confront any critics of this philosopher, other than Rousseau? To ask this is to answer it: he does not.<sup>12</sup>

2. Pinker places not merely his thumb on the balance scale, but his entire *elbow*: he waxes eloquent about explicit murders, but ignores numerous deaths created by government that are not so direct. For example, consider highway fatalities. There are some 40,000 per year in the U.S. alone.<sup>13</sup> Multiplied by 100 years this amounts to 4,000,000 from this one source; it is equivalent to the Napoleonic wars, which are in 19<sup>th</sup> place on his hit parade (see appendix). If we

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between these two claims of his, not to say a blatant logical contradiction.

<sup>10</sup> See, also, Benson, 1989, 1990; Block, 2007C, 2010B, 2011A; Casey, 2010; DiLorenzo, 2010; Gregory, 2011; Guillory & Tinsley, 2009; Hasnas, 1995; Higgs, 2009, 2012; Hoppe, 2008, 2011A, 2011B; King, 2010; Kinsella, 2009; Long, 2004; Molyneux, 2008; Murphy, 2005B; Rothbard, 1973, 1977A, 1998; Spooner, 1870; Stringham, 2007; Tannehill, 1984; Tinsley, 1998-1999 on anarcho-capitalism. None of these are mentioned by Pinker either, let alone refuted.

<sup>11</sup> See also Anderson and Hill (2004); Dykstra (2009, 2010). I owe the cites to Dykstra to my friend and Loyola colleague, Leo Krasnozhan

<sup>12</sup> For critiques of Hobbes from a libertarian point of view, see Hoppe, 1999; De Jasay, 1985; Molinari, 1977

<sup>13</sup> These numbers have decreased a bit in the last decade. For the argument that the cause of these deaths is not the proverbial speed, drunken driving and vehicle malfunction, but rather are the responsibility of the road managers, e.g., the state, see Block (2009).

consider the entire world, road socialism is a world-wide affair, we arrive at a much larger number.

In advanced western democracies, the government takes half the GDP. Suppose they did not. Posit that all taxes were abandoned. Might we then have a cure for cancer? For hurricanes? If so, then deaths from these sources are also the responsibility of Pinker's favorite institution, government. Is this too speculative? Well, then, consider the Food and Drug Administration, and its counterparts throughout the world. They have killed tens of thousands<sup>14</sup> of people by not allowing new drugs onto the market (Peltzman, 1973, 1974, 1987A, 1987B, 2005).<sup>15</sup> The FDA's delay of beta-blocker, alone, caused at least 50,000 premature American deaths.<sup>16</sup> Particularly horrific is the decision of this organization to not allow patients

on their last medical legs to throw the dice and try new untested and thus not approved drugs.

Then there is drug prohibition, which causes numerous additional deaths, all at the hands of government, also completely ignored by Pinker.<sup>17</sup> Nor can we forget about, as Pinker does, the government's decision to disallow markets in used body parts. Many thousands more die due to this anti commodification fetish of the state.<sup>18</sup>

Here is Rothbard's (1963) take on the institution so enthusiastically supported by Pinker:

"It is time now to bring the State into our discussion. The State is a group of people who have managed to acquire a virtual monopoly of the use of violence throughout a given territorial area. In particular, it has acquired a monopoly of aggressive violence, for States generally recognize the right of individuals to use violence (though not against States, of course) in self-defense. The State then uses this monopoly to wield power over the inhabitants of the area and to enjoy the material fruits of that power. The State, then, is the only organization in society that regularly and openly obtains its monetary revenues by the use of *aggressive* violence; all other individuals and organizations (except if delegated that right by the State) can obtain wealth only by peaceful production and by voluntary exchange of their respective products."

"All State wars, therefore, involve increased aggression against the State's own taxpayers, and almost all State wars (*all*, in modern warfare)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.fhareview.org/harm.shtml>

<sup>15</sup> See also Becker, 2002; Goodman, 2011; Gottlieb, 2010; Henninger, 1990; Higgs, 1994; Hoppe, 1993A; Kaitlin, et. al., 1987; Kazman, 1990; Klein and [Tabarrok](#), Undated; Peltzman, 1973, 1974; Sardi, 2007; Steinreich, 2005;

<http://www.thefreemanonline.org/features/economists-against-the-fda/>;

<http://www.econlib.org/library/Enc1/DrugLag.html>;

<http://www.scu.edu/civilsocietyinstitute/articles/upload/EconagainstFDA.pdf>;

<http://www.cato.org/pubs/handbook/hb111/hb111-15.pdf>;

<http://www.cato.org/pubs/regulation/regv27n2/v27n2-8.pdf>;

<http://www.independent.org/printer.asp?page=%2Fnewsroom%2Farticle.asp?id=403>;

<http://www.fhareview.org/references.shtml#peltzman73>;

[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703866704575224033831995628.html?mod=WSJ\\_latestheadlines](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703866704575224033831995628.html?mod=WSJ_latestheadlines)

<sup>16</sup> <http://spectator.org/archives/2009/06/22/the-employer-mandate-and-the-a>;

<http://www.independent.org/newsroom/article.asp?id=403>;

[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703866704575224033831995628.html?mod=WSJ\\_latestheadlines](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703866704575224033831995628.html?mod=WSJ_latestheadlines)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.drugwarrant.com/2009/10/4411/>; for the general case against drug prohibition, see Block, 1993, 1996B; Block, Wingfield and Whitehead, 2003; Cussen and Block, 2000; Friedman, 1992; Szasz, 1985, 1992; Thornton, 1991

<sup>18</sup> See on this Anderson & Barnett, 1999; Barnett, 1999; Barnett, Saliba, & Walker. 2001; Beard, Jackson & Kaserman, 2007-2008; Block, Whitehead, Johnson, Davidson, White and Chandler, 1999-2000; Block, 1987, 1988A, 1988B; Carey, 2002; Cherry, 1999; Clay and Block. 2002; Garner, and Block. 2008; Healy, 2006; Hippen, 2008; Kaserman, 2002; Kaserman & Barnett, 2002; Malek, 2001; Richards, 2001; Taylor, 2005, 2006, 2007; Wilkinson, 2003; Young, 2004

involve the maximum aggression (murder) against the innocent civilians ruled by the enemy State. On the other hand, revolutions are generally financed voluntarily and may pinpoint their violence to the State rulers, and private conflicts may confine their violence to the actual criminals. The libertarian must, therefore, conclude that, while some revolutions and some private conflicts *may* be legitimate, State wars are *always* to be condemned.”

In section II of this review I attempt to refute each and every error in this book. I conclude in section III.

## II. DETAILED CRITICISMS

Having given an overview of the general problems with this book, I now turn to a more thorough examination of its specific errors. This might prove tedious and unrewarding, but I think not. One reason is that Pinker is a gifted writer.<sup>19</sup> Any painstaking analysis of his work might therefore prove to be of interest. Another is that I regard this book as one of the best critiques of the only political philosophy with a hope for preserving our species<sup>20</sup> to come down the pike in many a year. An intensive refutation of it, in *detail*, is therefore all the more important. It is thus worthwhile to cover the numerous other fallacies committed by this author, not only the ones relevant to his main two theses. The more errors we can unearth in it, the better. Let us begin.

Our author describes Alex Hamilton as a person who (21) “devised the institutions that support modern market economies.” Not so, not so at all. Here is the “moderate,” “compromiser” Rothbard (1982A) on this historical figure:

“Deficits, therefore, should be eliminated by drastic slashes of government spending. But where and how? The answer: anywhere and everywhere. There is no mystery about it. Just

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<sup>19</sup> Is he more dangerous because of that? Maybe. But maybe not. Keynes (1936) was not well written, but caused great harm to our economy, and to the economics profession.

<sup>20</sup> Rothbardian anarcho-capitalism

slash with a hefty meat axe. Go down, for example, the Eisenhower budget and reduce every item back to it. Or better yet, the Roosevelt budget of the 1930s. Still better, the Grover Cleveland budget. *Still* better yet, return to the average annual budget of the Federalist period of the 1790s: \$5.8 million dollars. If that was good enough for the statist Alexander Hamilton, it should be good enough for our ‘libertarian’ Reagan Administration.

“Of course, my most preferred position is that the United States budget go back, or rather go forward, to a nice round Zero. But, to demonstrate my devotion to moderation, I could live with a transitional level of \$5.8 million for a year or two.”<sup>21</sup>

Pinker (27) opposes (presumably all) spanking of children. But a few light slaps, nothing anywhere close to the child abuse he rightfully condemns, can be defended on grounds of proper child protection. A non brutal spanking may be the difference between little Johnny playing in traffic and refraining from doing so. Our author favors the “time out” instead. But this too is invasive. If I were to give Pinker a “time out” for writing this book, that would amount to forced kidnapping. How can this, then, be justified by a radical child “rights” advocate such as this author?

Pinker (42) avers that “early states were more like protection rackets.” But in what way are modern governments any different? The state does indeed sometimes protect its citizens against criminals.<sup>22</sup> But protection racketeers did precisely the same thing, both against other protection racketeers, and miscellaneous marauders. The mafia did not happily tolerate it

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<sup>21</sup> For further critiques of the claim that Hamilton favored free enterprise, see DiLorenzo, 2008A, 2008B; Gordon, 2008; Gregory, 2011; Nock, 2010; North, 2012; Smith, 2008

<sup>22</sup> It also does the very opposite through its drug prohibitions, which enhance a criminal class, and its gun control laws, which disarm the law-abiding population.

when other criminals preyed upon its own clients.<sup>23</sup>

Political correctness rears its ugly head when Pinker (44) states: "Though we bristle when we read of Europeans colonists calling native people savages, and justly fault them for their hypocrisy and racism, it is not as if they were making the atrocities up." But it is not at all problematic, at least from a scientific point of view, to condemn these Europeans for their accurate assessments. It is unclear why it is racist to "justly fault" native peoples as "savages" when they do indeed engage in savage atrocities.

Pinker (47) asks, "If I were one of the people who were alive in a particular era, what would the chances that I would be a victim of violence?" This biases the statistics, however. Consider the death toll on the nation's highways, or as a result of FDA ineptitude, or which stem from drug prohibition. Are these all to be put down to "violence?" Well, maybe, yes, sort of. The government does employ violence in support of these institutions. It taxes people to pay for highways and streets, and would incarcerate anyone foolish enough to provide such services on a competitive basis without its permission. It upholds FDA decisions and the drug war at the point of a gun. On the other hand, many of the resulting deaths do not constitute direct violence, as being killed by a bullet. In order to remove this bias, we will count *any* untimely death, whether by a bullet, directly, or indirectly as the consequence of government roads, the FDA, the drug war, etc.

Pinker's figure 2-2 (49) indicates "that living in a civilization reduces one's chances of being a victim of violence fivefold (51)." But this is mere correlation. Is this relationship due to the rise of states, or is it in spite of them? He says (51), "The number of deaths per 100,000 people per year is the standard measure of homicide rates, and I will use it as the yardstick of violence throughout the book." Assume that road deaths

<sup>23</sup> I was going to footnote this claim when I realized that everyone knows this from watching gangster movies.

are 40,000 per year,<sup>24</sup> based on a U.S. population of 300 million. The rate of death per 100,000 people is thus 13.3 annually. This is not chopped liver. For purposes of comparison, Detroit homicides were rated at 45 (52) and at 30 in the 10 most dangerous U.S. cities (55).

Our author writes (76): "A fundamental insight of modern economics is that the key to the creation of wealth is a division of labor, in which specialists learn to produce a commodity with increasing cost-effectiveness and have the means to exchange their specialized products efficiently." But specialization and the division of labor are hardly discoveries of *modern* economics. Smith (1776) full well knew this in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as did the Salamancans (De Soto, 1996; Watner, 1987) in the 16<sup>th</sup>.

What are we to make of this statement of his (77): "Not only is a state well suited to provide the public goods that serve as infrastructure for economic cooperation, such as money and roads..."

There are three errors here, none of which Pinker confronts. Indeed, it would be difficult to come up with less apt examples than these. The history of government is one of monetary debasement, inflation, hyperinflation.<sup>25</sup> In contrast, the market's reliance on gold (and silver) is one of relative

<sup>24</sup> Traffic fatalities hit a low in 2011 of 32,367, down from 43,510 in 2005. [http://usnews.nbcnews.com/\\_news/2012/12/21/16070501-us-road-deaths-climbing-again-after-years-of-decline-new-data-show?lite](http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/12/21/16070501-us-road-deaths-climbing-again-after-years-of-decline-new-data-show?lite)

<sup>25</sup> To give but one example, the U.S. dollar has lost about 96% of its value in the roughly 100 years since the inception of the Fed, in 1913 (<http://www.ronpaul.com/congress/legislation/111th-congress-200910/audit-the-federal-reserve-hr-1207/>).

For more on the monetary mismanagement of the government, see Bagus, 2011; Block, 1999A; Block and Barnett, 2008; de Soto, 2006; Ebeling, 2000; Greaves, 1995. Hazlitt, 1965, 1980; Herbener, 2002; Hulsmann, 1998; Kaza, 1996; Laffer and Kadlec, 1981; Leconte, 2003; Mises, 1952, 1981; Mundell, 1981; Murphy, 2010; North, 1986; Paul, 1985; Rader, 1980; Reisman, 1996; Rothbard, 1962, 1994; Sennholz, 1975, 1979, 1985; Siegel, 1984, Vieira, 2002.

success. And how this author can choose statist roads as an example of the “Civilizing Process” when they kill some 40,000 people per year is beyond reason (Block, 2009). As for “public goods” proponents of this fallacy would be well advised to consult its critics,<sup>26</sup> as Pinker does not.

It is difficult to see how Pinker can impart a positive spin on “craft guilds” (78). Rather than promoting economic progress, they are an exercise in restricted entry. Our author applauds “the free market” (77); he supports middlemen and lending at interest (76). He does not seem to realize that guilds are incompatible with the free enterprise and laissez faire capitalism he favors on numerous occasions throughout his book.

It would be an exaggeration to claim that Pinker is totally unaware of the critics of Leviathan. He says (79): “Libertarians, anarchists and other skeptics of the Leviathan point out that when communities are left to their own devices, they often develop norms of cooperation that allow them to settle their disputes nonviolently, without laws, police courts or the other trappings of government.” He goes so far as to cite Ellickson (1994) in this regard (80). But Pinker cannot be allowed to have it both ways. The overwhelming majority of his commentary on government and anarchy is in exactly the opposite direction. I conclude than an alien presence snuck in when Pinker was not paying attention and is responsible for these few paragraphs in support

of anarchistic freedom.<sup>27</sup> But Pinker (80) quickly recovers from this alien invasion:

“As important as tacit norms are, it would be a mistake to think that they obviate the role for government. The Shasta County ranchers may not have called in Leviathan when a cow knocked over a fence, but they were living in its shadow and knew it would step in if their informal sanctions escalated or if something bigger were at stake...”

Our Harvard professor next (89) maintains the following:

“The most crime-prone regions in the world today are Russia, sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America. Many of them have corrupt police force and judicial systems which extort bribes out of criminals and victims alike and dole out protection to the highest bidder. Some, like Jamaica (33.7), Mexico (11.1), and Colombia (52.7)<sup>28</sup> are racked by drug-funded militias that operate beyond the reach of the law. Over the past four decades, as drug trafficking has increased, their rates of homicide have soared.”

He thus acknowledges the role of drugs in fomenting death, but claims this is “beyond the reach of the law.” No, no, no, a thousand times no. Rather, it is precisely the *result* of the law of the government he defends (well, sees as a force for good than bad), namely the legislation that prohibits drugs. This is 180 degrees contrary to his “civilizing” thesis, but he does not recognize it as such. In other words, Pinker is again attempting to have it both ways.<sup>29</sup> On the one hand, he full well recognizes the evils of drug prohibition; they give rise to drug gangs, criminals, militias. On the other hand, it can scarcely be denied that these are the results of the operation of his favorite institution, statist

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<sup>26</sup> Barnett and Block, 2007, 2009; Block, 1983, 2003B; Bibliography, undated; Cowen, 1988; De Jasay, 1989; Holcombe, 1997; Hoppe, 1989; Hummel, 1990; Osterfeld, 1989; Pasour, 1981; Rothbard, 1985, 1997; Schmitz, 1991; Sechrest, 2003, 2004A, 2004B, 2007; Tinsley, 1999. Rothbard's (1997, 178) *reductio absurdum* of public goods is as follows: “A and B often benefit, it is held, if they can force C into doing something. . . . [A]ny argument proclaiming the right and goodness of, say, three neighbors, who yearn to form a string quartet, forcing a fourth neighbor at bayonet point to learn and play the viola, is hardly deserving of sober comment.”

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<sup>27</sup> On a more serious note, I do indeed appreciate Pinker's mention of Ellickson (1994). But the authors mentioned in fn. 10, *supra* as much superior to Ellickson.

<sup>28</sup> These numbers refer to murders per 100,000 people per year.

<sup>29</sup> Presumably, the law of non contradiction has been repealed at Harvard.

democracies, not so much, of course Jamaica, Mexico and Colombia, but rather the nations with the most consumers of these banned products, such as the good old U.S. of A. Does he see this anomaly? He shows no evidence of having done so.

But wait. Perhaps I am being too kind to Pinker in thinking he sees prohibition as an evil that promotes violence. For he then calls it a “civilizing offensive” that “Community governments were set up to restrict gambling, drinking and prostitution” (91). This veers in the direction of re-prohibiting alcohol and keeping prostitution illegal. Yet Pinker is libertarian enough to want to legalize victimless “crimes” (133). Again, here is an unnoticed logical inconsistency on his part.

Pinker also contradicts himself on time preference. He writes (97): “... in the second half of the 19th century, police forces in American cities expanded, became more professional, and began to serve to criminal justice system rather than administering their own justice on the streets with their nightsticks.” Yet, according to virtually all criminologists, young impatient men, with high time preferences, are disproportionately overrepresented in crime statistics. These would be precisely the people most likely to be dissuaded by “nightstick justice,” and least likely to cease and desist based upon the slow-moving “justice” system of the state.

According to our author, the wild west was indeed an accurate representation of this geographical epoch.<sup>30</sup> He states (102-103): The American West, even more than the American South, was a zone of anarchy until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century... In the American Wild West, annual homicide rates were fifty to several hundred times higher than those of eastern cities and Midwestern farming regions...”

However, in the view of Anderson, and Hill (1997, p. 10):

<sup>30</sup> In the view of Pinker (687): “The West was wild because it was young men who went there while the young women stayed behind in the East.”

“The West during this time often is perceived as a place of great chaos, with little respect for property or life. Our research indicates that this was not the case; property rights were protected and civil order prevailed. Private agencies provided the necessary basis for an orderly society in which property was protected and conflicts were resolved. These agencies often did not qualify as governments because they did not have a legal monopoly on

“keeping order.” They soon discovered that “warfare” was a costly way of resolving disputes and lower cost methods of settlement (arbitration, courts, etc.) resulted. In summary, this paper argues that a characterization of the American West as chaotic would appear to be incorrect.”

It would have been satisfying to peruse Pinker’s rejection of this claim. Alas, he ignores it.

We are also treated to a biased view (105-106) of the anti alcohol, feminist temperance movement. Yes, one can readily agree with Pinker that less alcohol and more monogamous marriage reduces crime rates, *ceteris paribus*. But, again, this author fails to look at the other side of the equation. Historically the way to reduce alcohol consumption was through Prohibition. But this law, too, increases the death rate. Rival gangs fight over turf, and bathtub gin sickens and kills people. These deaths are ignored.

Our author states: “... far more people are killed in car accidents than in homicides...” (107). True, true, all too true. But this also goes against Pinker’s thesis and, again, he does not appear to recognize it. For automobile deaths can hardly be attributed to the “Hobbesian anarchy” against which Pinker inveighs, time and again. Rather, these fatalities take place on the very property, and thus are the *fault* of (Block, 2009) the institution our author is so anxious to defend: the all-loving government.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> And not the “crappy one” denigrated by Pinker (89, 279m 310-311, 313, 341, 681-862). The U.S., the “land of the free and the home of the brave” is now under consideration from this perspective.

Pinker (108-109) attributes rising death rates from 1960 to 1970 to radio and television, which raised the solidarity of the “new barbarians” (those aged 14 to 24). Maybe so. But this along with marriage is orthogonal, at best, to his thesis that government is a civilizing force. At worst, that is, more realistically, radio and television were then and still are now heavily under the regulation and control of the state.<sup>32</sup> So, if these means of communication are to be indicted for “barbarism,” a charge to which I am greatly sympathetic, again this can be laid at the door of the statist, not the anarchists.

Back to defending his thesis, Pinker (110) avers that the elites, the “upper classes (read, statist), lost power due to “informalization.” The lower classes no longer respected their betters because the latter “abandoned hats, gloves, ties, and dresses for casual sportswear.” But ‘twas President John F. Kennedy, about as upper crust as you can get, who was among the first famous person instrumental in foreswearing headgear. So this hardly constitutes a rebellion of the proletariat. Pinker (110) also credits (well, debits) the rise of Marxism “from the 1960s to the 1990s” as part of this de-legitimization process of the government and its leaders. But Marxism arose quite a bit before the 1960s, and continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, if the election of Obama can be interpreted as the popularity of socialism. Pinker’s (110) view of this phenomenon: “The leveling of hierarchies and the harsh scrutiny of the power structure were unstoppable and in many ways desirable. But one of the side effects was to undermine the prestige of aristocratic and bourgeois lifestyles that had, over the course of several centuries, become less violent than those of the working class and underclass.”

Pinker’s views on sex, drugs and rock and roll are also problematic. Reading his account of Jimi Hendrix (112) one might suppose our author to hold one of my all time favorite heroes, Lenny Bruce, guilty of fomenting violence. Yes, Peter

Townshend perished due to addictive drugs, but this was at least in large part the responsibility of Pinker’s favorite institution, for promulgating the drug war. Here we again see our author not with his thumb on the balance, but with his elbow.

Our Harvard professor waxes eloquent about the decrease in respect for law and order eventuating in fewer criminals arrested and imprisoned (115). He fails to distinguish between crimes with victims, and those lacking this ingredient. But victimless “crimes” are not rights violations. Incarcerating people “guilty” of such acts are therefore an *embodiment*, not the antithesis of, the very violence that Pinker and all men of good will oppose. In other words, our author has this one backwards. Instead of complaining that these types of prisoners are being locked up at decreasing rates, he ought to exult in that fact.

He also complains (115) that “the wards of mental hospitals were emptied.” Here, again, Pinker makes the same sort of error. If there is anything that his fellow psychologist Szasz (1961, 1963, 1979, 1985, 1992) has taught us, it is that many of the denizens of these institutions are innocent of any (real) crime. “Emptying” statist mental hospitals, then, is an act in *favor* of “the better angels of our nature,” not opposed to them, as per our author.<sup>33</sup>

Pinker (115) sees quite rightly that “the de-civilizing effects hit African American communities particularly hard.” But, strangely, our author is fully aware of Murray (1984) which demonstrates that *government*, with its vicious, depraved and immoral welfare programs, not anarcho-capitalism, was responsible for this plague on the black community. He goes so far as to reiterate the Murray (1984) hypothesis, attributing it to “perverse welfare incentives that encouraged young women to ‘marry the state’ instead of the fathers of their children.” Pinker (116) is “skeptical of theories of parental influence that say that fatherless boys grow up violent because they lack a role model or paternal discipline ... widespread fatherlessness

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal\\_Communications\\_Commission](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Communications_Commission); see also Goldsmith, 2004; Gregory, 2011; Marcus, 2004; Mayer, 1999

33 Of course, there are some real criminals in these institutions, too. They should be placed in prisons.

can lead to violence for a different reason.” I am not at all “skeptical” about this claim. What is the “different reason?” Pinker writes (116):

“All those young men who aren’t bringing up their children are hanging out with one another competing for dominance instead. The mixture was as combustible in the inner city as it had been in the cowboy saloons and mining camps of the Wild West, this time not because there were no women around but because the women lacked the bargaining power to force the men into a civilized lifestyle.”

So, heads Pinker’s thesis survives, and tails it does too. Pinker does not recognize that it does not matter which of these two reasons for violence in the black community is correct: fatherless boys are more likely to embrace crime, or “hanging out” breeds violence. *Both* of them stem from government welfare programs.<sup>34</sup> This should give him pause for thought. It does not. He plows along, oblivious to the fact that his cited evidence cuts *against* his own hypothesis.

It is not as if Pinker has an absolute allergy to confronting views with which he disagrees. He does take to task some worthwhile opponents. Murray (116), John Donohue and Steven Levitt (120), for example. My complaint is that he avoids like the plague his most serious adversaries, the libertarian anarchists.

Pinker (121) continues his analysis:

“By the early 1990s, Americans had gotten sick of the muggers, vandals and drive-by shootings, and the country beefed up the criminal justice system in several ways. The most effective was also the crudest: putting more men behind bars for longer stretches of time. The rate of imprisonment in the United States was pretty much flat from the 1020s to the early 1960s... But then it shot up almost fivefold, and today

more than two million Americans are in jail, the highest incarceration rate on the planet.”

Some of these inmates, no doubt, deserve to be exactly where they are.<sup>35</sup> But not *all* of them, not by a long shot. How does incarcerating vast number of non violent people, for the peaceful sale, manufacture and consumption of addictive drugs, for example, reduce violence? Rather, such laws are the very *embodiment* of violence, the reduction of which Pinker is often so intent.

Pinker (125) points to the doubt cast “on the wisdom of redistributing wealth at the point of a gun.” He goes as far as characterizing this as one “of the goofier ideas of the 1960s.” But what in bloody blue blazes does he think that *every* government, without exception,<sup>36</sup> does, other than precisely this? Certainly the election of Obama in 2008, and again in 2012, shows that this “wisdom” was back in full force. Of course, this is by no means a monopoly of the Democrats. There are no exceptions to this rule

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<sup>35</sup> However, libertarian punishment theory emphasizes making the victim whole, not jailing perpetrators, unless that is the only way to ensure they do indeed indemnify those they preyed upon. Crime should be seen as against the victim, not the government, Pinker (147, 148) to the contrary notwithstanding. Under present institutional arrangements, the victim pays twice; once from the crime itself, and secondly, as a tax payer, forced to pay for the care and feeding of prisoners, with air conditioning, color television sets, computers, gymnasiums, etc. In the view of Rothbard (1998, p. 88, ft. 6): “It should be evident that our theory of proportional punishment—that people may be punished by losing their rights to the extent that they have invaded the rights of others—is frankly a *retributive* theory of punishment, a ‘tooth (or two teeth) for a tooth’ theory. Retribution is in bad repute among philosophers, who generally dismiss the concept quickly as ‘primitive’ or ‘barbaric’ and then race on to a discussion of the two other major theories of punishment: deterrence and rehabilitation. But simply to dismiss a concept as ‘barbaric’ can hardly suffice; after all, it is possible that in this case, the ‘barbarians’ hit on a concept that was superior to the more modern creeds.” For more on this see Kinsella, 1996, 1997; Olson, 1979; Rothbard, 1977B, 1998; Whitehead and Block, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Democratic states certainly not excepted

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<sup>34</sup> We should never lose sight of the fact that the drug war, too, has played havoc in the inner city (see footnote 17, *supra*). It is to the eternal shame of the leaders of the black community that they did not oppose this horrendous slayer of their young men.

in the mainstream; it certainly applies to Republicans as well.<sup>37</sup>

In the considered opinion of Pinker (125) “‘Take Back the Night’ protests made these ... workplace, schools and street ... environments safer for everyone.” Well, yes, for about 5 minutes, while the rapists were too overcome with laughter to ply their usual practices. Well, maybe, for a half hour; as I am sure that the rapists find this *very* funny. The real reduction in rape comes about with the adoption of the great equalizer, the gun.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the best evidence for this is supplied by Kennesaw, Georgia, which had been suffering from an outbreak of rapes. The city fathers passed a law compelling virtually all adults to possess a firearm, and, also, to learn how to use it safely. The countryside was subsequently filled with women shooting at berms, in order to obtain their carry permits. Pinker would never guess what happened to the rape rate thereafter! It decreased markedly! Amazing. Score: one point for freedom and gun use, zero for rapists and statist gun controls.<sup>39</sup>

Pinker (127) mentions the “revitalizing process of the past two decades.” His book was published in 2011. The last two decades, then, presumably, refer to 1990-2010. It is difficult to see how all these “civilizing tendencies” held true for this entire period. One of them occurred in the 2012 election, but our author is not in a position to welcome this as “civilizing”: referenda in Washington State and Colorado legalizing drugs not for medicinal purposes but for recreational use. The problem, here, for Pinker, is that this will

reduce the incarceration rate, and run counter to that great civilizing force, Washington D.C.

Chapter 4 of this book regales us with horrid tales of man’s inhumanity to man. It is really not for the squeamish. But he declares (133): “... *all* of the first complex civilizations were absolutist theocracies which punished victimless crimes with torture and mutilation.” That is, *government* was responsible for these outrages. How Pinker squares this with his continual contentions that anarchism (absence of government) is the villain of the piece demonstrates once again his intellectual dexterity.<sup>40</sup>

One ploy of Pinker’s is to blame religion for these atrocities, not the state. He says (140): “Though no one knows exactly how many people were killed in these holy slaughters, we can get a sense from numerical estimates by atrocitologists such as the political scientist R.J. Rummel in his books *Death by Government* and *Statistics of Democide*.” I note something important here, typical of Pinker. The title of Rummel’s book is *Death by Government* not *Death by Religion*. Here, once again, Pinker relies on evidence that undercuts his own thesis, and is impervious to this difficulty. How is it possible to cite a book that blames government, not religion, in support of a claim that finds guilty religion, and not government? Only at Harvard would this sort of thing be acceptable. Similarly (140): “In the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Cathars of southern France embraced the Albigensian heresy, according to which there are two gods, one of good, and one of evil. An infuriated papacy, in collusion with the king of France, sent waves of armies to the region, which killed around 200,000 of them.” One wonders how many divisions the “infuriated” pope could call upon to this end? One suspects, precious few. In contrast, we may suspect that the king of France had quite a few. So, is this a religious atrocity, or one of, you guessed it, *government*? This is yet another indication that the state was far more responsible for these heinous deaths than were religious leaders.

<sup>37</sup> No, I take that back. There is one Republican exception: Ron Paul. See on this: Alford, 2013; Block, 2012B; Doherty, 2012; Hammond, 2012; Richardson, 2008; Rink, 2011; Stevo, 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Aziz, 2012; Block and Barnett, 2001A, 2001B; Block and Block, 2000; Halbrook, 1970[2012]; Kates, 1979; Kleck 1986, 1988, 1991, 1997; Kleck and DeLone, 1993; Kleck and Gertz, 1995; Kleck and Sayles, 1990; Lott, 1998, 2007; Shughart, 1999; Sowell, 2012, Stormfront, 2012; Tucker, 2012, Wright, 1998.

<sup>39</sup> On the Kennesaw case, see Baldwin, 2007; DeMar 2012; Kleck, 1991; Malnik, 2012; Mirror. 2010; Reynolds, 2007; Vatican, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> I do not mean this as a compliment.

Pinker falls victim to left-wing do-goodism when he writes (147): “The goal of the judicial system should be to rehabilitate wrongdoers rather than harming them...” and (148): “The only legitimate use of punishment, then, is to deter people from inflicting great harm on others than the harm inflicted on them.” What about forcing the criminal to compensate the victim? One wonders where this author from whence he gets his views? What is their basis? What reasons does he call forth to defend them? Does he just make this stuff up as he goes along? Pinker places great importance on rationality, but here he seems to be operating in the absence of this characteristic.<sup>41</sup>

Consider his (148) view that “A clearheaded view of criminal justice also entails that the death penalty is unnecessary as a deterrent and is not among the powers that should be granted to a state.” Naturally, Pinker does not condescend to refute empirical studies demonstrating that actual executions, not merely an unused “death penalty” law do have deterrent effects (Ehrlich, 1972, 1973, 1974, 1975, 1975B, 1976A, 1976B, 1977A, 1977B, 1978, 1979, 1981, 1982, Ehrlich and Gibbons, 1977, Ehrlich and Posner, 1974). It is more than passing curious that a statolatrist such as Pinker would oppose allowing this magnificent institution to put a murderer to death. Surely, so august a group as the *government* would never err in this regard.

Further, I now offer a “proof” that the death penalty is at least philosophically justified. Suppose A murders B. And, we have a machine such that if we place the perpetrator and his victim in it, and throw the switch, the life will transfer out of B and into A. That is, the murderer will lose his life to the person he unjustifiably killed. Would we be justified in compelling the criminal to enter this machine and give up his life in favor of the victim? Of course we would. A stole a life from B, and there is nothing that fits our notion of justice better than that B would get this precious commodity back from A. Now, of course, we do not have any such capability. No

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<sup>41</sup> For the libertarian view on punishment, see fn. 35, supra.

doubt in 500 years we will, if we do not blow ourselves up before that time. But by use of this contrary to fact conditional, we have proved that the murderer’s life is forfeit. By committing this unspeakable act, his has lost his right not to have his life taken from him.

Pinker is not immune to basic economic error. He (154) offers up this bit of “analysis”: “The slave trade not only killed people in transit, but by providing a continuous stream of bodies, it encouraged slaveholders to work their slaves to death and replace them with new ones.” However, there was “trade” in horses, cattle and pigs, and other farm and barnyard animals. There was a “continuous stream” of these creatures available, too. Yet, it was not at all the usual practice to “work these (beasts) to death and replace them with new ones.” Farmers, and slave owners too, presumably, attempt to maximize the present discounted value of their property, and hence profits. It would be the very rare case indeed where this could be accomplished by killing off *either* before their time of usefulness, merely because more were available.<sup>42</sup>

In the view of Pinker (156): “Closely related to slavery is the practice of debt bondage.” Au contraire, there is all the world of difference between them. The first is a clear and present rights violation, the latter need not be at all. In the truly free society, there might well be two kinds of loan contracts. The usual one, widely practiced today, would stipulate that if the debt is not repaid, the creditor may seize thus and such property (collateral) of the borrower (usually luxury goods) but not other things he may own (e.g., necessities, such as home, food, etc.). Two, an entirely different kind of contract, where not only is *all* the debtor’s property liable in case of default, but that includes his very person: that

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<sup>42</sup> Does Pinker confront the cliometricians (Fogel and Engerman, 1974; see also Hummel, 1996) who have studied this issue, and arrived at the opposite conclusion? To ask this is to answer it: of course not. Pinker (154) does mention Fogel and Engerman, but in a different context.

is, at the discretion of the creditor, the debtor may be placed in prison at hard labor, until he repays what he owes. Why would any borrower voluntarily sign such a contract? Presumably, because he is very sure he can repay the amount borrowed, and also, when he puts up such a significant amount of collateral (his person, his freedom), the interest rate charged will be lower than otherwise. It is a rights violation to place such a borrower in debtor's prison if he fails to fulfill his obligations? It is not clear why that should be the case. Certainly, Pinker offers no reason in behalf of his per se opposition to such arrangements. It should be noted that opposition to contracts of this sort amounts to a prohibition against "usury," since this amounts to a very high rate of interest (risking one's freedom), and would be outlawed. It should also be noted that we do now have debtor's prison, for those who fail to pay the taxes claimed by government. But this, presumably, at least for the Pinkers of the world, would be entirely acceptable, since the state is such an exalted institution.

But our author goes way further than merely opposing debtor's prison. He says (157, footnotes omitted):

"The history of our treatment of debtors ... illustrates the mysterious process in which violence has declined in every sphere of life. Western societies have gone from enslaving and executing debtors to imprisoning them and then to seizing their assets to repay the debt. Even the seizure of assets, he points out, is a kind of violence: 'When John buys groceries on credit and later refuses to pay for them, he has not used force. If the grocer goes to court and gets the police to seize John's car or bank account, the grocer and police are the ones who are initiating the use of force.' And because it is a form of violence, even if people don't usually think of it that way, this practice too has been in decline. The trend in bankruptcy law has been away from punishing debtors or squeezing assets out of them and toward giving them the opportunity of a fresh start. In many states a debtor's house, car, retirement accounts, and spouse's assets are protected, and when a person or company declares bankruptcy, they

can write off many debts with impunity. In the old days of debtors' prisons, people might have predicted that this lenience would spell the demise of capitalism, which depends on the repayment of loans. But the commercial ecosystem evolved workarounds for this loss of leverage. Credit checks, credit ratings, loan insurance, and credit cards are just some of the ways that economic life continued after borrowers could no longer be deterred by the threat of legal coercion. An entire category of violence evaporated, and mechanisms that carried out the same function materialized, without anyone realizing that that was what was happening."

True, free enterprise has been able to skirt around the danger of debtors stealing creditor's property. However, when it resorts to using credit ratings, etc., the state, once again, in its infinite wisdom, steps in with prohibitions against racial and other types of discrimination, thus undermining this safeguard.<sup>43</sup> But the main error of Pinker in this passage is that he fails, utterly, to distinguish between offensive (unjustified) and defensive (justified) violence. To be sure, "to seize John's car or bank account" is an act of violence, but it is entirely righteous, in that this is really the legitimate property of the grocer, not John.<sup>44</sup> John, if he resists this transfer of property back to its rightful owner, would be the one guilty of utilizing unjust violence.

Suppose a rapist R has his way with his victim, V. In medias res, V pulls out her revolver and shoots

<sup>43</sup> It turns out, surprise, surprise, that blacks have worse credit ratings than whites, even when wealth is held constant, and that therefore when banks discriminate in their mortgage lending against the former, this is deemed racist, and punished by law. (The fact that orientals have better credit ratings than whites, ceteris paribus, and that banks favor them even over whites, does not get these evil institutions off the hook.). See on this Block, Snow and Stringham, 2008; Liebowitz, 2008A, 2008B, 2008C, Liebowitz and Day, 1998. Pinker, unfortunately for his credentials as a supporter of liberty, free association, etc., supports anti discrimination legislation.

<sup>44</sup> Pinker is in error in characterizing the car or the bank account as John's. It is no such thing. This is in effect stolen property.

R. According to the “logic” employed by our author in this passage, V would clearly be guilty of employing “violence;” it would be unclear, at best, if R would also be in the wrong, given Pinker’s analysis. Well, yes, the rape victim who puts a bullet into her attacker is surely using “violence.” But it is entirely *justified* violence, as in self-defense. Perhaps this distinction escapes people who occupy the environs of Cambridge, MA.<sup>45</sup>

Our east coast liberal (157) believes that people can “sometimes (be) coerced by circumstances.” I beg to differ. I go so far as to say that in the entire history of the universe *no one* has ever been “coerced by circumstances”. I offer an extreme example to illustrate this:

Suppose that aliens grab A into their space ship, do horrid things to her, and then drop her into the middle of the ocean (back on earth, for those of you not paying full attention to this scenario). B, a boater, comes by and offers to rescue her, if she will agree to be his slave forevermore. Otherwise, he will leave her be, sure to drown, since she is now 500 miles from shore, and cannot swim that far. She agrees. She values her life more than her freedom. B is A’s benefactor. A profits from this transaction to the tune of the difference in degree she values these two options, her life and her freedom. B did not coerce her. *Circumstances* did not coerce her. The bad guys of the piece are the Martians, and them alone.

Pinker sees some of this, but not all of it by any means when he writes (158): “Governments ... are institutions that by their very nature are designed to carry out violence.” No, no, no, this is only *half* of the picture. Yes, governments “carry our violence” alright. But these weasel words hide more than they reveal. The full truth of the matter is that the state initiates unjustified violence, not the *defensive* variety indulged in by our victim of rape, mentioned above. Indeed,

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<sup>45</sup> See the response of Michael Dukakis to the hypothetical that his wife was raped and murdered: [http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1844704\\_1844706\\_1844712,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1844704_1844706_1844712,00.html)

government is the *only* institution in society<sup>46</sup> with the legal right not only to employ violence, but to *initiate* it against innocent people. There is a *gigantic* difference between initiatory and defensive violence. Indeed, this is perhaps the most important distinction in all of political philosophy.<sup>47</sup> Pinker entirely misses this crucially important libertarian point.

Our author is on firmer ground when he says (159), “Rummel estimates that governments killed 133 million people before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the total may be as high as 625 million. So once raiding and feuding have been brought under control in a society, the greatest opportunity for reducing violence is reducing *government* violence.” This is a bit difficult, however, to reconcile with the overriding thesis of this book: that the state is to be credited for human safety and well-being. This brings to mind the offer of the Mafioso protection racket: to “protect” their “clients” from *their own* predation.

Pinker (161) offers a paean to democracy. “The idea of democracy, once loosed on the world, would eventually infect larger and larger portions of it... and would turn out to be one of the greatest violence reduction technologies since the appearance of government itself.” He fails to confront to the views of Hoppe (2001A) to the contrary, needless to say. He fails to reckon with the fact that Hitler and the Nazis came to power through this very institution. One would have

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<sup>46</sup> Labor unions are an exception to this rule. See Block, 2010A. In the view of Rothbard (1963): “The State, then, is the only organization in society that regularly and openly obtains its monetary revenues by the use of *aggressive* violence; all other individuals and organizations (except if delegated that right by the State) can obtain wealth only by peaceful production and by voluntary exchange of their respective products. This use of violence to obtain its revenue (called ‘taxation’) is the keystone of State power.”

<sup>47</sup> Did anyone hear this joke: “Do you know the difference between a living room and a bathroom?” If the respondent fails to answer, the response is: “Well, don’t come to my house, then.” In like manner I say to Pinker whose appreciation of the difference between “starting up” and “hitting back” is problematic, “Don’t get into political philosophy.”

thought that in a book of over 800 pages Pinker would have at least mentioned, and tried to refute, such criticisms. He does, however, teasingly, mention our man Hitler (162) but in an entirely different context: "If Hitler's luck had held out a bit longer, he probably would have gone down in history as Adolph the Great."

Our author, however, is to be congratulated for his appreciation (171) that the industrial revolution was a civilizing force for good that vastly improved human welfare. However, Pinker's support for the industrial revolution by be tempered by his positive reaction to (177) "Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Nicholas Nickelby* (1839) ... (which) ... opened people's eyes to the mistreatment of children in British workhouses ..." Here comes a joke: "A person asks an economist, 'How is your wife?' Comes the answer: 'Compared to what'" Yes, the plight of children then was bad, horrid, compared to the present day, on average. But compared to pre Industrial Revolution times, it was an improvement, a vast improvement,<sup>48</sup> a point entirely missed by Dickens, and now by Pinker.

However, our author falls victim to the Malthusian fallacy (171):

"Before 1800 the mathematics of Malthus prevailed: any advance in producing food only bred more mouths to feed, leaving the population as poor as before. This was true not only in England but all over the world. Between 1200 and 1800 measures of economic well-being, such as income, calories per capita, protein per capita, and number of surviving children per woman, showed no upward trend in any European country. Indeed, they were barely above the levels of hunter-gatherer societies."

Malthus (1798) thought our species was destined to wallow at a subsistence level: if population rose above this point, we would need a weeding

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<sup>48</sup> See Ashton and Hudson. 1998; Berg, 1992; Crafts, 1985; Floud and Johnson, 2004; Floud and McCloskey, 1994; Hartwell, 1967,1970, 1972; Hayek, 1954; Levin, 1998; McKendrick,1983; Mises, [1949] 1998; Nardinelli, 1990; Rosenberg and Birdzell. 1987; Shaffer, 2012; Taylor, 1975

out: disease, war, pestilence, starvation. If our numbers fell below this level, more of us would survive, until the process reared its ugly head once again.

But this story is incompatible with the existence of (coercive) slavery, a virulent pox which has been with us from time immemorial. Suppose we really were in a subsistence level of productivity. How much would anyone pay for a slave? This would now be a worker who could not produce more wealth than was necessary to sustain himself, and maintain his numbers. Precisely. No one would pay a plugged nickel for the ownership of such a person. No one would invest any resources at all to capture such a person, or to keep him from escaping. Hence the "curious institution" would not exist. But slavery did sully our species, all throughout recorded history and presumably long before.<sup>49</sup> Scratch Malthus' subsistence theory, and Pinker's support of it as well.<sup>50</sup>

According to Pinker (174): "The growth of writing and literacy strikes me as the best candidate for an exogenous change that helped set off the Humanitarian Revolution." But this violates his

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<sup>49</sup> "Slavery has existed ever since man has been fighting wars. Back to the earliest civilizations and before, there has always been slavery. It is still happening today, from sex slavery here in America and abroad to traditional slavery in Africa, mid east and even in Asia.... The oldest known written records (Egyptian) speak of slaves. All the cultures, every continent, every tribe and native village on our planet had slaves. Until the practice was ended by the 'colonialists' and 'imperialists'." (<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100315143904AAMpNy3>).

"Slavery dates back to prehistoric man" ([http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What\\_year\\_did\\_slavery\\_start](http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_year_did_slavery_start)). "Slavery began in prehistoric times and has been practiced ever since." (<http://franklaughter.tripod.com/cgi-bin/histprof/misc/slavery1.html>)

<sup>50</sup> Pinker (620) finds it difficult to divorce himself from Malthusianism: "... the Industrial Revolution ... for the first time in history increased material well-being faster than the increase could be eaten up by population growth."

statist-democratic thesis. Unless, of course, he thinks the all-loving government is responsible for writing and literacy, a point he does not even attempt to make, let alone buttress. 'Twas Gutenberg, not the state, methinks.

Yet another counter example to Pinker's democratic and statist hypotheses is provided by our author himself, who posits the civilizing effects of (178-179):

"... e-mail, digital documents, Web sites, blogs, teleconferencing, Skype, and smart phones. And two centuries *before* they were written, the technologies of the day—the sailing ship, the printed book, and the postal service—had already made information and people portable. The result was the same: a global campus, a public sphere, or as it was called in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Republic of Letters... A global campus increases not only the complexity of ideas but their quality. In hermetic isolation, all kinds of bizarre and toxic ideas can fester. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and exposing a bad idea to the critical glare of other minds provides at least a chance that it will wither and die. Superstitions, dogmas, and legends ought to have a shorter half-life in a Republic of Letters, together with bad ideas about how to control crime or run a country. Setting fire to a person and seeing whether he burns is a dumb way to determine his guilt. Executing a woman for copulating with devils and turning them into cats is equally inane... Airplanes can bring people together, but people who live in a city are already together, so cities have long been crucibles of ideas. Cosmopolitan cities can bring together a critical mass of diverse minds, and their nooks and crannies can offer places for mavericks to seek refuge. The Age of Reason and the Enlightenment were also an age of urbanization."

Pinker does not see the need to claim, as did Al Gore about the internet,<sup>51</sup> that the state created all these good things. But, unless this is true, his

view that the democratic government reduced barbarism is weakened; nay undermined.

States Pinker (181):

"We are also committed to reason. If we are asking a question, evaluating possible answers, and trying to persuade others of the value of those answers, then we are reasoning, and therefore have tacitly signed on to the validity of reason. We are also committed to whatever conclusions follow from the careful application of reason, such as the theorems of mathematics and logic."

I don't accuse Pinker of plagiarizing these brilliant ideas from Hoppe (1993B, 1995). I make no such accusation. I am fully convinced that Pinker has not done his homework: he is totally unaware of Hoppe's contribution. I mention this issue only to highlight the similarities between the two authors. It is too bad that the former shows no evidence of being acquainted with the publications of the latter.

Pinker on several occasions waxes eloquent about the Golden Rule (182, 695, 697). He pays homage to the idea that we should act in a way to others in the manner we would like them to act toward us. In his words (182): "I have to state my case in a way that would force me to treat you in kind." This fails because of the masochist. He wishes that you would aggress against him. Therefore, according to the Golden Rule, he is justified in engaging in this violent act against others. A far better, more civilized rule of behavior is the non aggression principle (NAP) of libertarianism (Rothbard, 1973, 1982).

Pinker attacks anarchism on numerous occasions (35, 36, 51, 54, 74, 79, 102, 103, 104, 114, 166, 183, 199, 223, 291, 307, 312, 328, 336, 337, 347, 348, 515, 528, 538, 612, 677, 681).<sup>52</sup>

As a devout anarcho-capitalist, I take great exception to his numerous pot shots at this philosophy. What is anarchy? It is not a synonym for chaos, or barbarism, as Pinker and many

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<sup>51</sup> <http://www.snopes.com/quotes/internet.asp>;

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<sup>52</sup> I am trying to be thorough here, but I may have missed a few of them. Do you think Pinker has a thing with regard to anarchism?

others suppose. Etymologically, the prefix “an” in this word means “against.” So, against what, precisely, is anarchism? Why, archy, of course. And what in turn is archy? It is the unjustified rule of the tyrant against his victims. In other words, what anarchists oppose<sup>53</sup> is violations of the NAP. Anarchists support the NAP. Anarchism is the embodiment of the non aggression principle. Its opponents, then, such as Pinker, support violations of the NAP. And they call themselves civilized, and us barbarians.

A case in point is world government. He is Pinker's (288-289, footnotes omitted) view on that monstrosity:

“World government seems like a straightforward extension of the logic of the Leviathan. If a national government with a monopoly on the use of force is the solution to the problem of homicide among individuals and of private and civil wars among factions, isn't a *world* government with a monopoly on the legitimate use of *military* force the solution to the problem of wars among nations? Most intellectuals did not go as far as Bertrand Russell, who in 1948 proposed that the Soviet Union should be given an ultimatum that unless it immediately submitted to world government, the United States would attack it with nuclear weapons. But world government was endorsed by, among others, Einstein, Wendell Willkie, Hubert Humphrey, Norman Cousins, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and William O. Douglas. Many people thought world government would gradually emerge out of the United Nations.

“Today the campaign for world government lives on mainly among kooks and science fiction fans. One problem is that a functioning government relies on a degree of mutual trust and shared values among the people it governs which is unlikely to exist across the entire globe. Another is that a world government would have no alternatives from which it could learn better governance, or to which its disgruntled citizens could emigrate, and hence it would have no

natural checks against stagnation and arrogance. And the United Nations is unlikely to morph into a government that anyone would want to be governed by. The Security Council is hamstrung by the veto power that the great powers insisted on before ceding it any authority, and the General Assembly is more of a soapbox for despots than a parliament of the world's people.”

This is impeccable reasoning. Once allow a Hitler, a Stalin, or a Mao<sup>54</sup> to be in charge of the entire planet, through world government, it is pretty much curtains for most of the human race.

The only problem with Pinker's magnificent rejection of world government is that he does not seem to realize that as an opponent of anarchism, he is logically *compelled* to *accept* this type of institutional arrangement. The option before him, the *only* option before him, and for everyone else of course, is world government or anarchism. States Rothbard (1963) in this regard:

“In the modern world, each land area is ruled over by a State organization, but there are a number of States scattered over the earth, each with a monopoly of violence over its own territory. No super-State exists with a monopoly of violence over the entire world; and so a state of ‘anarchy’ exists between the several States. (It has always been a source of wonder, incidentally, to this writer how the same conservatives who denounce as lunatic any proposal for eliminating a monopoly of violence over a given territory and thus leaving private individuals without an overlord, should be equally insistent upon leaving *States* without an overlord to settle disputes between them. The former is always denounced as ‘crackpot anarchism’; the latter is hailed as preserving independence and ‘national sovereignty’ from ‘world government.’)”

At present, Canada and Cuba are in a state of anarchism with each other, since there is no world government that rules over both of them. The same applies to China and Chile, to France and Fiji, to Afghanistan and Algeria, to Spain and Sweden, to Grenada and Great Britain; indeed, to

<sup>53</sup> At least of the Rothbardian anarcho capitalist variety; I speak of no other type

<sup>54</sup> And don't say it can't happen here

all the nations on the planet. Elsewhere (183) Pinker has this to say: "... in a state of anarchy, people's self-interest, self-deception, and fear of these shortcomings in others would lead to constant strife." The anarchist idea is that without a national government, individual A and B will be at each other's throats. But the same identical relation exists in the international context. Without a *world* government, countries A and B will engage in fisticuffs, and worse, with each other. The logical implication, here, is *not* that we should eschew world government. Rather, it is that it (183) "must be checked by the power of other people, to force them to govern with the consent of the governed. They may not use violence against their citizens beyond the minimum necessary to prevent greater violence. And they should foster arrangements that allow people to flourish from cooperation and voluntary exchange. This line of reasoning may be called humanism."<sup>55</sup> The problem with Pinker is not that he contradicts himself.<sup>56</sup> Mere logic should not be allowed to constrain Harvard professors. The difficulty is that he does not even realize that he is doing so, and thus makes no effort, none whatsoever, to rescue himself from this predicament. Enquiring minds would dearly love to know how he would attempt to extricate himself from this dilemma, were he but to be made aware of it. Perhaps, maybe, there is hope for our author as a potential convert to libertarian anarchism. For he does deliver himself of this remark (186, footnote omitted): "In *The Blank Slate* I argued that two extreme visions of human

nature—a Tragic vision that is resigned to its flaws, and a Utopian vision that denies it exists – define the great divide between right-wing and left-wing political ideologies. And I suggested that a better understanding of human nature in the light of modern science can point the way to an approach to politics that is more sophisticated than either." Well, libertarianism, too, is neither left nor right; the freedom philosophy rejects both.<sup>57</sup> Perhaps there is hope for Pinker after all.

In my view, Pinker's most important thesis is that government is a force for good. If anything sticks in the craw of the anarchist, that would be it. I now arrive at what I see as his second most important thesis: the death toll is decreasing over time. Exhibit "A" is Pinker's chart (195; see appendix of present paper).

A key element in Pinker's analysis is to count not the absolute number of deaths in any one episode, but rather that relative to, or divided by, the entire earth's population at the time. With this technique he demonstrates that even though World War II killed the most people (55 million), its adjusted rank is only 9<sup>th</sup> in these death sweepstakes. I suggest this is misleading. A better relative measure would have placed in the denominator not the population of the entire planet, but only what I call for want of a better word the relevant number of people. For example, the Napoleonic Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were pretty much confined to Europe and a bit of Asia. Why count the populace of the other continents? Similarly, the deaths due to the fall of the Ming Dynasty and the Taiping Rebellion were pretty much confined to China, and those of the French wars of religions and the Russian Civil War to those nations, respectively. If this practice were followed, I suspect that Pinker's

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<sup>55</sup> In the view of Pinker (240): "The great powers took on the responsibility of preserving peace and order (which they pretty much equated), and their Concert of Europe was a forerunner of the League of Nations, The United Nations and the European Union. This international Leviathan deserves much of the credit for the long intervals of peace in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe." Does this sound like support for centralization in the direction of World Government. It sure does to me.

<sup>56</sup> Later in the book (288-289) he offers as splendid a critique of world government as can be written. But here (183) he is calling for "other people," who else than world government?, to check the power of national governments.

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<sup>57</sup> See on this Block, 2010; Hultberg, 2005; Read, 1998; also see [http://www.google.ca/#hl=en&sugexp=les%3Bpchatce&gs\\_rn=1&gs\\_ri=hp&cp=9&gs\\_id=10&xhr=t&q=nolan+chart&pf=p&tbo=d&output=search&client=psy-ab&oq=nolan+cha&gs\\_l=&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or.r\\_gc.r\\_pw.r\\_qf.&bvm=bv.1355534169,d.cGE&fp=fbd581612f005b5a&bpcl=40096503&biw=1280&bih=878](http://www.google.ca/#hl=en&sugexp=les%3Bpchatce&gs_rn=1&gs_ri=hp&cp=9&gs_id=10&xhr=t&q=nolan+chart&pf=p&tbo=d&output=search&client=psy-ab&oq=nolan+cha&gs_l=&pbx=1&bav=on.2,or.r_gc.r_pw.r_qf.&bvm=bv.1355534169,d.cGE&fp=fbd581612f005b5a&bpcl=40096503&biw=1280&bih=878)

contentions would fall by the wayside, or at least be radically reformed.

Here is a minor error (197). There was no “civil war” in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S. In a true civil war, e.g. Russia, 1917 or Spain, 1936, there are two sides each of which desires to rule over the entire country, consisting of the possessions of both. The U.S. case, while the North did indeed wish to prevail over the south, and thus attain sovereignty over the entire country, the opposite was not true. The latter merely wished to secede from the former. Thus a more accurate title for this conflagration would be *The War Between the States*, or *the War to Prevent Southern Secession*, or *the War of Northern Aggression*.

Another mistake is to equate anarchism with of all things, practically its polar opposite, feudalism (199). Free market anarchism is the embodiment

of the freedom philosophy: all people are free to do exactly as they wish, provided, only, they act in a way compatibly with their respecting the same rights for all others. Feudalism in contrast reserves such liberty to the king and his nobles; all others are serfs, not too far removed from actual outright slavery.<sup>58</sup>

I have no objection to critics whose main work lies outside the realm of political economy impugning research from this discipline. But when they do so, it would be nice if they gave reasons for their rejection. Pinker (207) refers to the “so-called business cycle” but vouchsafes us no justification for his claim that such variations are “really a sequence of unpredictable lurches in economic activity rather than a genuine cycle with a constant period.” Business cycles need a “constant period?” Perhaps in music or mathematics, but not in economics.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Henderson, 1980; Hoppe, 2004; Reisman, 2006; Rothbard, 1998, ch. 10, 2012

<sup>59</sup> There is a library full of citations to economic business cycles with which I will not clutter up the present review. All anyone needs to do is google “business cycle.”

**Appendix (source: p. 195)**

Rank	Cause	Century	Death toll	Death toll: mid-20th-century equivalent	Adjusted rank
1	Second World War	20 <sup>th</sup>	55,000,000	55,000,000	9
2	Mao Zedong (mostly government-caused famine)	20 <sup>th</sup>	40,000,000	40,000,000	11
3	Mongol Conquests	13 <sup>th</sup>	40,000,000	278,000,000	2
4	An Lushan Revolt	8 <sup>th</sup>	36,000,000	429,000,000	1
5	Fall of the Ming Dynasty	17 <sup>th</sup>	25,000,000	112,000,000	4
6	Taiping Rebellion	19 <sup>th</sup>	20,000,000	40,000,000	10
7	Annihilation of the American Indians	15 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup>	20,000,000	92,000,000	7
8	Josef Stalin	20 <sup>th</sup>	20,000,000	20,000,000	15
9	Mideast Slave Trade	7 <sup>th</sup> - 9 <sup>th</sup>	19,000,000	132,000,000	3
10	Atlantic Slave Trade	15 <sup>th</sup> -19 <sup>th</sup>	18,000,000	83,000,000	8
11	Timur Lenk (Tamerlane)	14 <sup>th</sup> -15 <sup>th</sup>	17,000,000	100,000,000	6
12	British India (mostly preventable famine)	19 <sup>th</sup>	17,000,000	35,000,000	12
13	First World War	20 <sup>th</sup>	15,000,000	15,000,000	16
14	Russian Civil War	20 <sup>th</sup>	9,000,000	9,000,000	20
15	Fall of Rome	3 <sup>rd</sup> -5 <sup>th</sup>	8,000,000	105,000,000	5
16	Congo Free State	19 <sup>th</sup> -20 <sup>th</sup>	8,000,000	12,000,000	18
17	Thirty Years' War	17 <sup>th</sup>	7,000,000	32,000,000	13
18	Russia's Time of Troubles	16 <sup>th</sup> -17 <sup>th</sup>	5,000,000	23,000,000	14
19	Napoleonic Wars	19 <sup>th</sup>	4,000,000	11,000,000	19
20	Chinese Civil War	20 <sup>th</sup>	3,000,000	3,000,000	21
21	French Wars of Religion	16 <sup>th</sup>	3,000,000	14,000,000	17

***END of the Part 1***

**[Proceed with the Part II](#)**

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