

The Washington Times

September 6, 2002

Indulging in the luxury of blame

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BELFAST, Northern Ireland.--It's the same old song at the presumptuously named "Earth Summit" in Johannesburg. Leaders of nations that have brought us "wars and rumors of wars" live in plush surroundings like the fattest of cats while they indulge in the luxury of blaming others — specifically the United States — for the sufferings of the world's poor.

Just in time to rescue them from their delusions and the rest of us from their already disproved and expensive prescriptions for bettering humankind comes a new book by Steven Pinker, a psychology professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a leading authority on human nature.

In "The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature," which the London Times excerpted last week, Mr. Pinker boldly and credibly challenges the foundational principle of modern liberalism, to wit, that violent people and many other social pathologies are created by external forces, not an internal condition. The liberal belief that violence is learned from our environment is wrong, says Mr. Pinker, who believes we are all innately aggressive and that we should be asking not why violence occurs, but why it is so often avoided.

This is an important book, because if its central thesis can be grasped by political leaders and educators, we can save ourselves not only the fruitless endeavors of many social improvement schemes, but also enormous amounts of money.

Mr. Pinker believes, "The romantic notion that all evil is a product of society has justified the release of dangerous psychopaths who promptly murdered innocent people. And the conviction that humanity can be reshaped by massive social engineering projects has led to some of the greatest atrocities in history."

Communism and Fascism are only two of the more obvious ones. Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, who denounced British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Johannesburg for Mr. Blair's criticism of him, has his own form of ethnic cleansing going as he forcibly removes white farmers from their land, handing it over to black farmers.

Mr. Pinker skewers the liberal dogma that violence is

caused by ignorance, discrimination, poverty and disease. "But this mantra is not based on any sound research," he writes. "Wild swings in American crime rates — up in the 1960s and late 1980s, down in the late 1990s — continue to defy any simple explanation. And the usual suspects for understanding violence are completely unproven and sometimes patently false."

One after another, Mr. Pinker knocks down various social myths and explanations for violence. Noting that feminists, especially, have blamed the American conception of maleness for most violent acts, Mr. Pinker notes that "Spain has its machismo, Italy its braggadocio and Japan its rigid gender roles, yet their homicide rates are a fraction of that of the more feminist-influenced U.S."

He also rejects any link between violence in films and on television and violent behavior, noting that "people were more violent in the centuries before television and movies were invented. Canadians watch the same television shows as Americans but have a fourth their homicide rate. When the British colony of St. Helena installed television for the first time in 1995 its people did not become more violent. Violent computer games took off in the 1990s, a time when U.S. crime rates plummeted."

Mr. Pinker writes that psychologists have found that people prone to violence have a distinctive personality profile: "They tend to be impulsive, low in intelligence, hyperactive and attention-deficient. They are described as having an oppositional temperament. They are vindictive, easily angered, resistant to control, deliberately annoying and likely to blame everything on other people. The most callous among them are psychopaths, people who lack a conscience, and they make up a substantial percentage of murderers."

Mr. Pinker is an evolutionist who believes in Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, which carries its own set of epistemological and even theological problems. What Mr. Pinker must grapple with, but does not effectively, is whether human nature can be changed. He believes, incorrectly in my view, that the flawed can heal the flawed of their flaws. Nothing in history or common sense gives one faith in that scenario. Human nature must be transformed by a Power greater than what wiser writers have called fallen humanity.

While Mr. Pinker's remedy may be imperfect (he is, after all, human), his diagnosis is correct. His position should be the starting point in any debate about whether to continue spending money on programs that fail to take human nature into account.

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