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## Moving Toward a World Beyond War

By Thomas F. Lee  
January 31, 2016

“America must lead in a dangerous world,” solemnly advises Hillary Clinton. Relieving us of naïve optimism, Bernie Sanders advises: “We live in a difficult and dangerous world, and there are no easy or magical solutions.” Chris Christie claims that President Obama lives in a fantasy world, ignoring that “people are in pain and facing a dangerous world.” A Jeb Bush commercial informs us that Donald Trump doesn’t have the skill or temperament to lead the nation in a dangerous world. Marco Rubio’s campaign website thunders: “The world has never been more dangerous than today.” If we don’t quite believe the junior senator, let’s consider the words of the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey who asserted in 2013: “I will personally attest to the fact that [the world is] more dangerous than it has ever been.”

All of this would seem to justify huge U.S. defense budgets, endless development of new weapons, countless interventions around the world, a maze of secret governmental spy organizations, loss of civil liberties, wars that never end, and death and destruction galore. But wait a minute. Is it true that the world is riddled with violence and on the verge of catastrophe?

To answer that question we need good data and an historical perspective, an approach that doesn’t interest most politicians. Fortunately, economist Max Roser has assembled easy-to-understand charts to make it easy.

**Myth:** Wars kill huge numbers of people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Reality:** This might seem plausible given the “dangerous world” assumption, but Roser’s chart shows just the opposite. Deaths in all kinds of war have plummeted and are low at the present. It’s much more of a peaceful world than a dangerous one, especially by historical standards.

**Myth:** Poverty is proliferating in the modern world.

**Reality:** A safer world means that people can climb out of poverty. Roser shows that the share of the world population living in absolute poverty is declining rapidly. The trend has been accelerating downward since 1980. “People just get it completely wrong,” says Roser, of the expectation that poverty would be rising rather than shrinking.

**Myth:** Life expectancy is low in large portions of the world, validating the old maxim that life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (philosopher Thomas Hobbes, 1651).

**Reality:** On the contrary, insists Roser, life expectancy has been rising since about 1850 in the western world, and skyrocketing recently in the poorest countries like Bangladesh and India. People in the developing world are now routinely starting to live to a ripe old age. This says volumes about the high quality of everyday life, a blessing that would be impossible in countries beset by constant danger and war.

What are we to make of these trends? In a seminal book on the decline of human violence throughout the ages, Harvard’s Steven Pinker asserts “we may be living in the most peaceable era in our species’ existence.” The only problem he says is that people don’t believe it. The “dangerous” worldview has tremendous currency and momentum, fueled by a mass media that focuses on what’s wrong rather than what’s right. The War Party now seems ascendant with its “danger” message. Indeed, a Salon headline announced in 2015 “The slow, painful death of America’s antiwar movement.”

Why don’t activists run with these spectacular trends to put an end to the reflexive “danger” assumption? Pinker answers: “a common belief among activists is that any optimistic datum must be suppressed lest it lull people into complacency. Instead, one must keep up the heat by wailing about ongoing crises and scolding people for being insufficiently terrified. Unfortunately, this can lead to a complementary danger: fatalism.”

We must be willing to tell the truth about continuing human progress in a spirit that encourages excitement and engagement. Freed from unwarranted fear, we can work to accelerate the journey toward an even more peaceful, humane world. The forces of enlightenment and peace are blowing in our direction and, according to Roser and Pinker, have been blowing that way since before we were born. Peace might even be inevitable but let’s not take the chance: let’s nudge it. Come to Monterey and learn more about a world beyond war.