

Francis Fukuyama: Are We Becoming More Peaceful?

Guiding Question:

When examining the history of conflict and war, has mankind developed morally and politically in a progressive manner? What do examples of 20th and 21st century mass violence show?

Transcript:

JOEL ROSENTHAL (Carnegie Council): In [The End of History](#) you talk about history having some sort of direction. It reminded me of [Andrew Carnegie](#), who also believed that history had some sort of direction. His view was that mankind was improving, that there was moral development in addition to political development. As part of this direction, things like—famously he referred to slavery, dueling—these things would be perceived as illegitimate as part of this direction. But then he came out against war and conflict. He did think that there would be some evolution where rational human beings would see war as immoral.

Was that just a case of him just going a little bit too far?

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA: I don't think so. There are a number of anthropologists that have done empirical estimates of homicide rates over the very long span of human history. There is a prior tradition that comes out of [Rousseau](#) where people believe that violence in human history was an evolved characteristic, that the noble savage was actually peaceful, and also eco-friendly and very green. It turns out that everything we can tell about early human beings suggests that is not true, and indeed the primary precursors of human beings don't look like they were very peaceful either.

When you estimate murder rates in contemporary hunter-gatherer societies, or you try to estimate rates of violence in archeological digs where they have uncovered among Neanderthals and among other early human communities mass graves, and lots of evidence of really terrible violence inflicted on other people, it looks like we are actually getting better, although you wouldn't know that from the current headlines. But the rate of homicides in Washington, D.C., is still notably lower than it was in London in the 15th century, and that in turn was a lot lower than it was in hunter-gatherer times. So there is some empirical ground for saying that things are getting better.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: So there may be a way to think about conflict in a way that doesn't necessarily lead to total violence, chaos, industrial war, and that it can somehow be domesticated in some way.

FRANCIS FUKUYAMA: We are very cynical about that because of the 20th century. The 19th century had been a century of progress, economic growth, and was largely free of large-scale wars. It turned out that once you turned industrial production towards the process of war, you could kill an awful lot of people.

But again, to put that in an even broader historical context, the 20th century ended in 1945 in a certain way and things have been quite peaceful, although obviously the potential of nuclear weapons is still there.

Additional Critical Thinking Questions:

What is Francis Fukuyama's argument in this video clip?

What do the speakers mean by "history has some kind of direction"?

What are examples of moral and political progression when examining the history of conflict?

What are examples of ways in which mankind has not been morally and politically progressive in history?

What do you think? When examining history, has mankind been morally and politically progressive in its approach to conflict and war? Why or why not? Give specific examples and reasoning.