Peace In Our Time

What was the most peaceful era of human history? The 200-year-long *Pax Romana* in the Roman Empire? The peaceful period in Asia following the Mongol conquests? The Ming dynasty in China?

You probably haven't considered our present times, since we're constantly reading about the spread of ISIS, incursions by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and what appears to be an escalating conquest of Ukraine by neighboring Russia. Every day you read about the threat of terrorist attacks.

But evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker, author of "The Better Angels of Our Nature," has compiled statistics which make a compelling case that fewer people are dying as a result of violence in today's world than at any time in history. The wars we hear about are relatively contained—when you add up the populations of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and eastern Ukraine (and not every citizen in those nations is directly impacted by war), it comes to just 1.37% of the world population. And the peaceful zones in between are much greater in this century now that we've given up the habit of waging world wars.

Pinker offers some interesting perspectives; for instance, deaths in warfare among certain aboriginal tribes in New Guinea and Fiji were higher than in Germany throughout two world wars. But his definition of peace is broader than simply fewer armed conflicts; he also takes into account murder rates and civilian violence in countries around the world. The murder rate during the gold rush in California was among the highest in recorded history; today, California is hardly a bastion of violence. In Europe, torture and public executions were common, and it was not uncommon to see severed heads resting on spikes as you entered a city. Today this kind of thing is rare globally and virtually nonexistent in the Western states. Slavery has been abolished, and the laws have had a significant dampening effect on the once-common instances of rape, infanticide, lynch mobs and cruelty to animals.

The conclusion of the book is that not only are we living in the most peaceful time in world history, but that this may be the least-appreciated development in the history of our species.

Which countries are the most and least peaceful? For that information, you turn to the Global Peace Index, which was created by the Economist magazine from data compiled by the Institute for Economics and Peace. The methodology is detailed; each country is ranked based on its relations with neighboring countries (being at war earns a low score; the U.S./Canadian border earns the highest); level of internal conflict (countries embroiled in civil wars receive low scores); political instability; terrorist activity; number of homicides per 100,000 people; level of violent crime; number of jailed persons per 100,000 citizens; military expenditure as a percentage of GDP; and citizen access to small arms and light weapons.

In general, the Institute found that peace tends to be found in countries with higher income, schooling, high levels of government transparency and low corruptions. You also find greater measures of peace in stable countries that are part of regional blocks (think: Eurozone).

The most recent ranking, completed in 2014, lists Iceland, New Zealand, Switzerland, Finland, Austria, Norway, Belgium, Japan, Canada and Denmark as the top ten most peaceful countries, and their overall rankings are pretty similar. To find the United States, you have to go all the way down to number 101, where the high homicide rate, highest per-capita number of people in jails, huge military expenditures and high number of external conflicts that the military is engaged in all pull the ranking down. Not surprisingly, the bottom of the scale includes Iraq, Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Sudan and Somalia—the most well-publicized war zones.