OMNI NEWSLETTER #3 ON VIOLENCE,
April 8, 2012, BUILDING A CULTURE OF PEACE.
Compiled by Dick Bennett. (#1 Feb. 25, 2008; #2 August 20, 2011)
See OMNI Newsletters on International Day to End Violence Against Women, part of OMNI’s National/International DAYS Project.

Here is the link to all OMNI newsletters:

http://www.omnicenter.org/newsletter-archive/ Many of OMNI’s topical newsletters confront different kinds of violence: empire, militarism, torture, individual wars, etc. See Index. Also see the newsletters on resistance: nonviolence, conflict resolution, diplomacy, etc.

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If violence incites more violence, whether by individuals or nations, if all forms of terror
foster one another, if their intimidation and repression produce dictators, then it requires little reflection to recognize the need for alternatives, particularly if we seek equity, rights, and peace.

STEVEN PINKER, VIOLENCE HAS DECLINED
REVIEWS
BOOKS | October 09, 2011

Is Violence History? By By PETER SINGER
In his new book, Steven Pinker argues that our current era is less violent, less cruel and more peaceful than any previous period of human existence.

Appearances often deceive. Steven Pinker’s “The Better Angels of Our Nature” landed on my desk in the immediate aftermath of that terrible massacre in Norway. As I read the book, Syrian forces slaughtered pro-democracy protesters, riots engulfed English cities, and murders punctuated the news. But, if we believe Pinker, all this violence is just the background noise behind a relentless paean of peace. He’s probably right. The world today is less violent than it has ever been. We’re living through the longest period without war between great powers since Roman times. All other categories of violence — murder, rape, child abuse, wife-battering — have also declined. Pinker thinks his revelations are Earth-shattering, but, in fact, he’s merely proved something that most historians have long accepted, namely that there’s no reason to be nostalgic about the past.

(VIKING) - ‘The Better Angels of Our Nature’ by Steven Pinker
Most people, however, think they live in uniquely violent times, a popular misconception that encourages panic. Travelers frightened of terrorism spurn airplanes in favor of much more dangerous cars. Parents worried about sidewalk pedophiles drive children to school and thereby exponentially increase the risks they face. The world seems violent partly because films, Web sites, video games and music pummel us with images of brutality. Parents cringe when Ice Cube boasts: “I can act like an animal, ain’t nothin’ to it/Gangsta rap made me do it.” Pinker, however, thinks that’s simply hot air — pretend violence has replaced the real thing.

The rather unfortunate title of this book will encourage readers to assume that this is another installment in self-help spiritualism encouraging us to befriend our angels. In fact, the book is populated
not by winged cherubs, but by cold rationalists. The bibliography stretches to 32 pages, testimony to Pinker’s zealous research. More than 100 graphs assess the extent of violence and chart the evolution of control mechanisms. Many of those graphs look remarkably similar: A diagonal line moves from top left to bottom right, charting how violence has declined.

Statistics, however, also deceive. Pinker’s avalanche of evidence camouflages dodgy analysis. For instance, he frequently mentions that blacks in America are peculiarly susceptible to violence. Statistics bear that out, but the painful truths that lie beneath those raw numbers need careful handling. Instead, Pinker cites the connection between matrimony and passivity, arguing that blacks are violent in part because they are notoriously unenthusiastic about marriage: “Perverse welfare incentives . . . encouraged young [black] women to ‘marry the state’ instead of the fathers of their children.” Reckless analysis of this sort can foster dangerous bigotry.

Pinker aggressively discounts economic explanations, arguing that violence rose from the late 1960s to the ’90s (when times were good) and fell after 2001 (when recession hit). Yet that glib assessment ignores how specific social classes have fared. Some groups that never benefited from postwar prosperity grew impatient with inequality by the late 1960s. Pinker fails to see how violence became a logical expression of anger for them. “The urban riots . . . [of] the 1960s,” he argues, “were not a part of the civil rights movement and erupted after most of its milestones were in place.” That’s nonsense. The riots were a response to the limitations of the civil rights movement, namely its inability to address material inequality as opposed to legal discrimination. They led directly to the Kerner Commission report of 1968, which inspired positive programs to address inner-city problems. A generation later, those programs contributed to the decline in violence that Pinker celebrates.

Rates of violent deaths have declined, but psychologist Robert Epstein argues in this review that it is too early to praise human nature's "better angels."
By Robert Epstein | October 7, 2011 |
According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), worldwide military expenditures have been growing annually for the past 15 years, and between 15 and 20 major armed conflicts—yes, wars—are in progress as you read this. All told, upward of 175 million people died in war-related violence during the 20th century, plus another eight million because of conflicts among individuals.

Even so, according to a weighty new book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking Adult, 2011), by Harvard University psychologist Steven Pinker, the "better angels" of human nature have actually brought about a dramatic reduction in violence during the past few millennia. Yes, the absolute number of victims has been rising, but relative to the world’s population, the numbers look good.

The shift toward nonviolence, he says, has been driven by many factors, such as the spread of agriculture and the rise of feminism and democracy. Such trends have led to a reduction in institutionalized torture and execution and slavery and, especially in recent years, to an increase in the rights of women, homosexuals, children and animals.

Pinker acknowledges that one’s immediate experience belies these facts to the point where you might even want to call him "hallucinatory." Yet the wealth of data he presents cannot be ignored—unless, that is, you take the same liberties as he sometimes does in his book. In two lengthy chapters, Pinker describes psychological processes that make us either violent or peaceful, respectively. Our dark side is driven by a evolution-based propensity toward predation and dominance. On the angelic side, we have, or at least can learn, some degree of self-control, which allows us to inhibit dark tendencies.

There is, however, another psychological process—confirmation bias—that Pinker sometimes succumbs to in his book. People pay more attention to facts that match their beliefs than those that undermine them. Pinker wants peace, and he also believes in his hypothesis; it is no surprise that he focuses more on facts that support his views than on those that do not. The SIPRI arms data are problematic, and a reader can also cherry-pick facts from Pinker's own book that are inconsistent with his position. He notes, for example, that during the 20th century homicide rates failed to decline in both the U.S. and England. He also describes in graphic and disturbing detail the savage way in which chimpanzees—our closest genetic relatives in the animal world—torture and kill their own kind.
Of greater concern is the assumption on which Pinker’s entire case rests: that we look at relative numbers instead of absolute numbers in assessing human violence. But why should we be content with only a relative decrease? By this logic, when we reach a world population of nine billion in 2050, Pinker will conceivably be satisfied if a mere two million people are killed in war that year.

The biggest problem with the book, though, is its overreliance on history, which, like the light on a caboose, shows us only where we are not going. We live in a time when all the rules are being rewritten blindingly fast—when, for example, an increasingly smaller number of people can do increasingly greater damage. Yes, when you move from the Stone Age to modern times, some violence is left behind, but what happens when you put weapons of mass destruction into the hands of modern people who in many ways are still living primitively? What happens when the unprecedented occurs—when a country such as Iran, where women are still waiting for even the slightest glimpse of those better angels, obtains nuclear weapons? Pinker doesn’t say.

**BULLYING**  [see Newsletter #1]

“We won! 'Bully' to be rated PG-13”

Katy Butler via Change.org  mail@change.org  via uark.edu
to jbennet 4-7-12

Dick -
I have some amazing news to share.
Last month, I saw the new documentary, Bully, which reveals the raw and honest reality behind bullying in high schools and middle schools. I cried when I watched the movie because I was horribly bullied in middle school. That’s why I was shocked to find out that other young people like me might not be able to see the movie because the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) gave it an “R” rating.

Outraged, I started a petition on Change.org asking the MPAA to change the rating to PG-13. After more than half a million people signed -- including you! -- the MPAA agreed. When Bully is released on April 13, it will be rated PG-13, and the most controversial scene in the film will remain unchanged, reflecting the reality and brutality of bullying.

This happened because people like you -- 500,000 strong -- came together to say that we think the issue of bullying in schools is important, and if this movie can help, then kids should be able to see it. We were even joined by people like Ellen DeGeneres, Meryl Streep, Johnny Depp, Michael Jordan, Drew Brees, Justin Bieber, and 35 members of Congress. My petition was covered by almost every major TV station and newspaper in America.
When I was bullied, I felt alone. But today I feel the power of half a million people standing beside me. Thank you so much.
- Katy

If there's something you want to change in your community, it only takes about 2 minutes to start your own petition. Just click here to get started.
This email was sent by Change.org to jbennet@uark.edu

NEW FILM ON REDUCING VIOLENCE IN CHICAGO
Ian Harris to PJSA, 9-11-11

I highly recommend "The Interrupters," a documentary about a group called Ceasefire Chicago that consists of ex gangbangers working to reduce violence on Chicago's southside. They use nonviolent methods. You will see restorative justice, compassion, violence prevention and mediation used to resolve conflicts in one of the most violent neighborhoods in the United States.
Ian  Ian Harris  imh@uwm.edu

BOOK ON POLITICAL VIOLENCE REPRINTED
Professor Christopher Hewitt’s Consequences of Political Violence.
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“Rights Commission Rebukes U.S. on Domestic Violence” by Amanda Wilson, News Report, NationofChange: “In a groundbreaking decision that affirms domestic violence as an international human rights issue, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has ruled that the U.S. should do more to protect victims of domestic violence. The ruling, officially made in July, was detailed in a report officially released to the public here on Wednesday. The decision marks the first time that an international tribunal has found that the U.S. violated the rights of a domestic violence survivor. It also specifically articulates that failure to respond to domestic violence can constitute a human rights violation by the U.S. government.” READ | DISCUSS | SHARE http://www.nationofchange.org/rights-commission-rebukes-us-domestic-violence-1313855460