INTRODUCTION

Are We Killers or Peacemakers?

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

—Matthew 5:38–45

Our world today is dangerous. It has always been dangerous, but modern technology, a globalized economy, easy communications, and massive migration now spread the effects of crisis in one part of the world to other parts very quickly. We do indeed live in a “global village.” But like ancient village societies, we still have our clans and tribes, each with their territories, whose competitive disputes can degenerate into violence and occasional genocidal massacres. Like the agrarian states and civilizations that emerged from stateless societies thousands of years ago, we still have competing religions that usually coexist but set boundaries that can lead to very violent wars and genocidal purges. Like the modern technological societies that came into being in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we still have competing nationalisms, and we still struggle to cope with all the changes brought about by modernity. We still generate new ideologies and adapt old ones to support one side or another in the disputes that are produced by the conflicting demands of the modern world. These have produced massive genocidal violence in the twentieth century and may do so again.

Despite this stark prospect, in this book we plan to show that there is no reason to despair. Pre-state societies, agrarian states, different reli-
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gions, and modern states and societies have also devised ways of mitigating conflicts, so that not all of them have been excessively violent, and relatively few have been genocidal. Without such mechanisms, human history would be far more tragic, and today our species would have little prospect of surviving much longer. We can learn from past attempts to control violence, and we can devise new ways of dealing with crises that may lead to political massacres.

Conflict can become genocidal when powerful groups think that the most efficient means to get what they want is to eliminate those in the way. It can become equally or more murderous when the motive is revenge, and descend to the worst levels of slaughter when there is great fear that the survival of the enemy group might endanger the survival of one’s own group. The most intractable cause of genocidal killings emerges when competing groups—ethnic, religious, class, or ideological—feel that the very presence of the other, of the enemy, so sullies the environment that normal life is not possible as long as they exist.

As we proceed through the book, however, we will see that it is possible in many ways to combat the tendency for conflicts to degenerate to such a point. Developing exchanges with other groups lessens the chances that any conflict will reach genocidal proportions. Codes of honor, moral teachings, and formal rules to govern conflict have the same effect. We will explore ideologies that are so absolutely sure of themselves that they demand extreme final solutions that wipe out their enemies, yet we will also find ideologies that are far more tolerant and accepting of compromise. These are not necessarily pacifist ways of thinking, but ones that are based on skepticism about any absolute judgment of others or situations. Enlightenment ideas that originated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can moderate extremism. By exposing the myths that can lead to genocidal wars for the unhistorical fabrications that they really are, objective examinations of the past can make it more difficult to stoke genocidal passions. Emphasizing the worth of individuals, their distinctive attributes, and their rights over those of impersonal communities greatly diminishes the likelihood that intolerant, closed groups will be able to recruit enough members to become dangerous. Enlightenment thinking these days may be an increasingly insecure basis for trying to prevent the kinds of conflicts that
could lead to genocide, but it is surely one, despite its Western origins, that is worth trying to preserve, particularly because it faces challenges even within the West.

At a much more modest level, there are many ways of lessening tensions between different communities. We will look at truth and reconciliation commissions. These do not provide universal solutions, but in some circumstances they can help. In some places decentralization and local autonomy can greatly decrease internal tensions. Building up civil society institutions, particularly ones that bring members of different ethnic and religious groups together, can, in the long run remove some of the flammable tinder that many leaders have used to move their people into massacring others. Those who want to set forest fires will always be around, but if they have less material to work with, they are more likely to fail.

We will show that it is possible to devise strategies to help lessen the chances that competition will turn to extreme violence. In addition to the well-known international mechanisms for supporting peace and reducing conflict, there are also many local, small-scale programs such as the ones we will discuss in chapter 4. These are well worth pursuing, not only in troubled areas, but everywhere, because conflicts can always arise. Although their cost is modest, they require patience and humility because they cannot be imposed by force or succeed quickly.

The study of those cases in which the impulse to “kill them all” prevailed can clarify some of the darkest aspects of human history yet also offer hope. We have always known how to do better. Understanding why excesses occur is an important step toward understanding some of the dire conflicts that exist in today’s world, and it can provide a foundation for policies aimed at reducing and limiting violent conflict. That can greatly reduce the potential for genocide and lesser kinds of mass political murder.

Ours is a controversial subject. Talk of genocide or of mass political murder arouses deep emotions. Scholars, policymakers, and general publics disagree bitterly about definitions, about what actually happened in historical cases, about who was responsible, about how many died, and about whether or not anything could have been done to prevent these deaths. Disagreement is not just about obvious distortions,
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such as those few who still deny that the Nazis or the Ottoman Empire committed genocides. There are many cases that are not as clear. Was the patent neglect of famine conditions in Ireland by the British government in the midnineteenth century genocidal? More than a million died in the potato famine, but there were no death camps, no roving squads of killers, only what many would consider criminal disregard by a government that could have done much to help. Was the American bombing of Hiroshima genocidal? Tens of thousands of women, children, and noncombatant men died, but this was part of a war, and some argue that by shortening the war it actually saved more lives than it took. Others consider this one of the great crimes of the twentieth century. How about the U.S. ethnic cleansing of Native Americans such as the Cherokee, when forced expulsions resulted in thousands of deaths? Were these examples of mass murder, even though most of the victims died as a result of hardship, famine, and disease rather than outright execution? We discuss such cases, and not every reader will agree with our conclusions.

Some may think that it is a mistake to look at less clear or less deadly cases of mass killing. It can be argued that the moral force of denouncing and acting against genocide is undermined by any suggestion that more limited forms of violence, such as deadly ethnic riots or localized massacres, are part of the same phenomenon. For example, those who claim that the killing of the Jews by the Nazis was so total and gruesome that there are no comparable cases have already introduced that argument into the debate about definitions of genocide. For those who believe this, comparison with lesser-scale atrocities is itself a form of Holocaust denial. Going back to age-old cases and examining ethnographic studies about pre-state societies may seem to those who want to concentrate on modern crimes to be a trivialization of the subject. Obviously, we think differently, though we can sympathize with such concerns.

It is part of our central contention that all such cases, whether large or small, have a logic and rationale behind them. The perpetrators, and certainly their leaders, always have some reason in mind to justify their action, and we need to take that reasoning seriously, even if we entirely disagree with it. Thus, to say that the Ottoman authorities who initiated
the genocide of Armenians really thought that the Armenians threat-
ened the survival of the empire and even the survival of an independent 
Turkish state infuriates some Armenian nationalists who maintain that 
there was no such threat, only blind Turkish prejudice. We can debate 
whether or not there was a real threat, but it seems undeniable to us 
that the Ottoman leaders thought it was real, and that this is why they 
acted as they did. Rationality is a very slippery concept, but in general 
we believe that most political massacres are quite deliberate, are di-
rected by or at least approved by the authorities, and that they have a 
goal, even if the actual murders can take advantage of momentary pas-
sions and a lust for killing that appears in such events. The rationale 
behind such actions may be based on false information, on essentializ-
ing prejudice, or on reasoning that is more self-interested than logical, 
but this does not lessen the fact that the perpetrators believe that mass 
killing is the right thing to do.

Similar controversies arise in any discussion about ways of preventing 
mass killing. There is a large and rapidly growing literature on conflict 
resolution and prevention, but little consensus about what works and 
what does not. Pursuing leaders responsible for mass murder and bring-
ing them to justice? Education campaigns? Strengthening international 
institutions? Alleviating poverty? Building civil society? Promoting truth 
and reconciliation commissions? These and others have all been pro-
posed and will be examined. We treat these various approaches with 
caution, because no single method seems to us to offer a comprehen-
sive solution.

We would never claim that ours is the final word on this important 
subject. New studies of mass political murder continue to be published, 
and new cases keep arising. The future holds more genocidal episodes, 
and some will be on a very large scale. Nothing in our research suggests 
that the reasons for such mass killings have disappeared or are likely to 
disappear any time soon. On the contrary, today’s world seems poised 
for a whole new set of massacres, perhaps religiously based, that will 
combine the horrors of twentieth-century, state-sponsored killing with 
the faith-based ideological intolerance of the great wars of religion that 
bloodied many parts of the world in earlier eras. Yet, at the same time, 
there are ever more international organizations striving to prevent
bloodshed, to create conditions that will lead to better conflict resolution, and to promote mediating institutions able to dampen violence and make mass killing less likely. We want to contribute to this effort while remaining realistic about the dangers that face us.

In order to arrive at our policy proposals in chapter 4, we begin by laying out the causes of mass murder for political ends in chapter 1, where we spell out the main reasons for such events. In both modern and ancient times, it has occasionally simply seemed convenient to rid oneself of obstructive enemies by either exterminating or forcibly removing them. Such removals on a large scale invariably resulted in massive death rates, and they still do, as has been shown in such cases as the ethnic cleansings in Yugoslavia in the 1990s and in Darfur in the early 2000s. The desire for revenge has also produced mass murder, as has the fear that if an enemy is not totally destroyed it will strike back. The worst kind of fear is that somehow an enemy group’s very survival on earth is so polluting and dangerous that it needs to be entirely wiped out. Hitler believed this about Jews, the Khmer Rouge about Vietnamese and those Cambodians infected by Vietnamese thinking, the Hutu governing elite in Rwanda about Tutsis, and some Protestants and Catholics about each other during Europe’s religious wars. The Bible itself mentions many such examples.

This brings up another major controversy that we examine in our first chapter. Are genocides such as those perpetrated by Hitler, or by Stalin’s purges and mass killings of millions, events that could only take place in modern societies? No one denies that there has always been a lot of slaughter, but could it be that both the scale and thoroughness of more recent mass murders is of a different order than past events? We will show that even though exceptionally brutal genocidal episodes have always occurred, modern nations have in one aspect raised the stakes of conflicts by turning us all into jealous tribes. This was the norm when humans lived in small-scale societies, but then our numbers were small. It became less common as states turned wars into competitions more between elites than between masses, but in a sense, we have been retribalized on a very large scale.

To better understand why mass murder occurs, we will turn in chapter 2 to the psychology of genocidal killing. Steven Pinker, a psycholo-
gist widely known as a defender of the idea that much human behavior is innate and biologically determined, has written that any simplistic view of our species as either naturally violent or peaceful misses the main point.

The prevalence of violence . . . does not mean that our species has a death wish, an innate thirst for blood, or a territorial imperative. There are good evolutionary reasons for the members of an intelligent species to try to live in peace. . . . Thus while conflict is a human universal, so is conflict resolution. Together with all their nasty and brutish motives, all peoples display a host of kinder, gentler ones. . . . Whether a group of people will engage in violence or work for peace depends on which set of motives is engaged. (Pinker 2002, 58)

No one doubts that different individuals have varying psychological predispositions that lead them to be more or less violent as well as more or less conciliatory, and the same goes for different ethnic, religious, or class-based groups and societies. Different states and nations also have different propensities to be more or less aggressive. It is equally true that changing circumstances can make violence-prone individuals, groups, and societies more peaceful, or vice versa. This was true in the past and remains so today.

We take the position that mass killing is neither irrational nor in any sense “crazy.” Humans are predisposed to think of competing groups other than their own in essentializing, that is to say, stereotypical ways, and this obviously leads easily to demonization of entire communities of perceived enemies. Our emotions—anger, shame, fear, resentment—predispose us to violence when we feel threatened, and to mass murder against those who most stand in our way or endanger us. But our psychological predispositions lead us in the opposite direction as well, toward love and an aversion to killing. It is only by accepting this paradox and studying the reasoning that lies behind both violence and peacemaking that we can make some progress in controlling our darker impulses.

This book therefore explores why and under what circumstances competition and conflict between groups, both within single societies and between them, become more or less deadly. How do such conflicts
sometimes reach the genocidal level? What mechanisms exist to mitigate conflicts so as to reduce the chances of such drastic outcomes? By looking at the specific conflict mitigation mechanisms developed by both pre-state and state societies, our third chapter explains why most conflicts, even wars, did not become genocidal. Some very ancient ways of limiting violence have persisted into modern times. In a number of cases, however, both in the past and today, such arrangements have failed. This has led to, and continues to produce, atrocious carnage.

The huge genocides of the past century—the slaughter of Armenians in 1915, the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, the Nazi Holocaust from 1941 to 1945, the Cambodian destruction of a quarter of its population from 1975 to 1979, the Rwandan genocide of 1994, the mass murders in the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, and the more recent ethnic cleansing and murders in Darfur, taking place as we were finishing this book—have captured the world’s attention and have killed vast numbers of people. But there have been many more less-publicized episodes in other countries, some killing tens of thousands, some a few thousand, some only a few hundred. It is our contention that many of the same impulses that lead to massive genocide are present in these episodes that kill far fewer individuals, but nevertheless encompass the massacre of men, women, and children who are members of groups targeted for elimination by their enemies. Large-scale genocides need the organizational power of government; lesser instances may not need as much organization, though local authorities are almost invariably complicit.

In recent years there have been many excellent studies on this subject, particularly of the major genocides in the twentieth century, but also some examinations of earlier incidents of mass killing. Many such studies are cited in the pages that follow. Our book’s aims, however, are broader in three ways. First, we suggest that representing ancient as well as modern examples of mass killing is important in demonstrating the normality of such violence. No continent, no century, no civilization is exempt from this behavior. Second, we suggest that mass murder is rare in relation to the kind of power imbalance that makes such killing possible. The victors in intergroup violence do not usually try to wipe out the vanquished and all their relatives. Why not? This perspec-
tive leads us to look at psychological, cultural, and institutional barriers to mass killing, and to look for these across a range of political forms from pre-state societies to the modern nation-state. Third, and perhaps most important, we suggest that there is a continuum in mass killing that offers a better understanding of the worst examples from examination of smaller and less horrific examples.

Understanding how to control lesser episodes of mass political murder, we believe, is a necessary step toward the control of large-scale genocide, and just as important. By the time Hitler had control of Germany, had conquered most of Europe, and had decided to exterminate Jews, it was too late to do much about it other than to defeat him and destroy his military power. The time to take preventive action would have been years before Hitler came to power, perhaps even decades earlier. The same holds true for other major tragedies of this sort. The final, most terrible steps may develop quickly and in unforeseeable ways, but the conditions that make them possible do not develop overnight. Knowing how they happen can lead to awareness of the coming danger.

The same perspective informs our understanding of pre-state episodes of genocidal behavior. Obviously, when societies were organized as small bands of self-governing kinfolk, conflicts that led to the elimination of one group or another killed very few people, though the consequences for a particular family, village, or clan could be just as genocidal as when large groups have been killed in more modern times. We believe that focusing only on more modern and large-scale genocidal events narrows our understanding of how such events take place and of what can be done to prevent them. In trying to explain the phenomenon of mass political murder, we therefore move back and forth in time and examine cases that include both relatively small numbers of people and very large numbers.

Conflict within and between societies is inevitable, and humans will sometimes resort to violence in such conflicts. But our societies have developed many ways of mitigating conflict, and given the number of potential and actual conflicts that exist, most are either not deadly or not very deadly. Large-scale genocide is quite rare, and even genocidal episodes on a lesser scale are usually avoided. It is when the mechanisms for conflict mitigation break down, or new situations occur in
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which such mechanisms have not yet been developed, that the worst situations occur. By examining conflict-limiting mechanisms both in pre-state and state societies, we believe we can better understand the general phenomenon of mass killing. Human beings are not by nature either bloody monsters or peaceful angels; rather it is situations, institutions, and socially agreed-upon interpretations of these that move human action toward peace or violence.

Studying what has caused terrible wars and genocidal slaughters in the past and how human societies have sought to control such violence opens a window into our contradictory, frightening, but also redeeming nature. That is one reason to study this subject. There is, however, a more important reason for studying mass, politically motivated murder through the ages. In our retribalized, dangerous world, with its vastly improved communications and advanced technology, we need to develop policies that lessen the probability of genocidal conflicts. This we will do in our fourth chapter, which concentrates on policy recommendations. Again, we will move from large-scale to much more modest proposals, and we will be once more asking our readers to remember that there are no single explanations, no easy answers, and often no clear-cut moral solutions to the problems that lead to terrible conflicts.

At the start of the twenty-first century the admonition from Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount quoted at the start of our introduction seems no closer to realization than it did two thousand years ago. Although mass political murder for convenience, for safety, for vengeance, and for supposed purity have afflicted every century, the twentieth century was in many ways the worst ever, and the twenty-first has started off promising to be as bad or worse.

There is evil, and there is good, but ours will not be a book that merely condemns those who commit evil. Rather, we are going to try understanding why evil occurs, and why almost any group of humans is capable of both good and evil. We believe that this is the only way to propose effective methods of countering mass killing, and that it is also the only way to understand our own contradictory impulses.