

disasters that you know will come.

The practice of foreign policy is rooted in this pessimistic, conservative view of human nature, because all of history supports it. So perhaps what we really need to talk about when we try to choose between these two versions of the world — the world of the long past and this perhaps ephemeral, happier world of the recent past — what we need to do is talk a little bit about human nature.

Why was the world like that then, why might it be different now? I think I have a hypothesis. I don't have an answer. In fact, it's the sort of area where you can't have hard answers. But I have a suggestion for why things might have been that way then and yet now be different.

Think about who we were before we became civilized. Some of us here are descended from ancestors who have been civilized (in the sense that they grew crops and were ruled from cities) for 5 000 years; others, for the last 50 years. It doesn't matter. Our ancestors, however far back, were at one point all hunter-gatherers. They all lived in small bands living off the land.

Small by definition. Hunter-gatherers don't come in bands of more than a couple of hundred, because you can't handle more people than that socially, and the bonds that hold them together are personal bonds. Now these small hunting-and-gathering societies have a couple of interesting characteristics. We've run across a fair number of them in the past couple of centuries in the course of conquering the world, and written down what they were like before we exterminated them, so we have a fair amount of knowledge of how hunter-gatherer societies operate.

They cover a wide spectrum of behaviours and values, of course, but there are constants. One is that they tend to be egalitarian, almost leaderless societies. They are not tyrannies. They are societies where at least all the adult males, and sometimes all the adults, have approximately equal rights and equal say in whatever few decisions have to be made — not democracies exactly, but groups with a proto-democratic cultural style and mentality. And the other constant is that they are constantly at war in one way or another with all of their neighbours.

In evolutionary terms this makes perfectly good sense: you find it right through the primate family. These are groups that have to spread out on the land in order to have enough territory to survive. How do you ensure that there aren't encroachments? By policing the boundaries. By having little mock battles — sometimes real battles, but not many people get killed — against the neighbouring groups of the same species (humans, in our case) in order to guarantee that you maintain enough territory to feed your people.

This is the pattern through the highlands of New Guinea, through North America before the arrival of the Europeans, presumably through Europe 6 000 years