

The Biology of Conflict: Ruling Out World Government

Steven M. Huybrechts

Word Count: 6107

Abstract

Millions of years of evolution have programmed individual humans to feel an intense loyalty to a human subgroup, such as a nation-state or tribe. This idea, a product of the theory of genetic drift, has enormous implications for the feasibility of a world government. The uncomfortable conclusion is that a world government cannot be established on the supra-nation-state model (state sovereignty yielded to the United Nations, for example) as these human subgroups are biologically driven to be in conflict with one another. Armed with this knowledge, we can develop rules through which a world order could be constructed, one that does not run counter to human nature. This order must include a provision for strong human subgroups, nations in this case, exercising influence in world affairs commensurate with their true power relative to all other subgroups. Influence on world decisions must be based primarily on the military and economic might of individual states, not on a “one person, one vote” or a “one nation, one vote” model, if the system is to avoid breaking down into war and anarchy.

Biography

Dr. Steven Huybrechts has spent most of his career developing space technology for the Department of Defense as a scientist, engineer, and organization leader. In his last assignment, he led the Integrated Experiments and Evaluation Division at the Air Force Research Laboratory, Kirtland Air Force Base, New Mexico, where he was responsible for selecting and overseeing some of the nation's highest priority space experiments. Previously, he established and was the chief of the Center for Spacecraft Component Technologies where he was responsible for the Air Force's research portfolio of spacecraft power, structures, and control technologies. In addition to a BSc from McGill University in Physics & Computer Science, he has a Masters and a Ph.D. degree from the Aeronautical and Astronautical Engineering Department at Stanford University. Dr Huybrechts has received the RNASA Stellar Award for Space Achievement, AFMC's Science and Technology Achievement Award, the highly prestigious Arthur S. Flemming Award, and 8 Air Force awards for technical achievement. He was named a Fellow of the American Institute for Aeronautics and Astronautics (AIAA) at the age of 33, the youngest Fellow ever inducted in the Institute's history. He is the author of 36 technical articles, 4 magazine articles, and 10 patents. Dr. Huybrechts is currently a student at the National War College in Washington D.C., earning a Masters of Science degree in National Security Studies.

Dr. Huybrechts' permanent email address is: smhuybrechts@stanfordalumni.org

Our pleasures were simple -- they included survival

- Dwight D Eisenhower

Picture a frontier deep in the wilderness. As small fish scatter out of the way, several shapes wade across a cold, rapidly flowing creek – they pause from time to time to check for movement in the trees on the opposite shore. It is a cold crisp night on the border, the half-moon barely casting enough light to see the smooth water-worn pebbles under their feet. The platoon leader clasps his weapon tightly, scanning the rocks ahead – he barely notices his breathing growing deeper as his fear rises. Tensions are high and this platoon, along with others guarding the line of control, is part of the trip wire. The danger to them is palpable and real - yet not one of them doubts that they would be willing to give their lives, if necessary. Their mates, their children, their way of life all depend on it. Tonight, strength is all that really stands between security and destruction – military strength. Across the creek, an enemy platoon lies in wait – feeling the same fear, the same resolve. The two sides in this conflict are not dissimilar. They look alike, speak a similar language, eat the same foods, have the same needs, fight with the same weapons, love their families with equal fervor, fear the enemy in the night with the same feeling of dread. Yet they have both developed a strong sense of culture, a belief that their ideology is superior to all others, and complex military systems which are poised to invade and kill. Neither side really questions why, for they do not really know – the answer lies in the dimness of our forgotten past.

The scene described above might well have played out along the frontier in 50 AD as the Roman Empire was expanding to glory. It may have played out on the Grecian coast hundreds of years

before Jesus Christ walked the earth. It may have played out on the US-Mexico border after President Polk doubled the size of the nation in an apparently effortless land grab or in the Scottish highlands where William Wallace waged his eventually futile war for independence from the British crown. One might very well witness this scene today in Korea, in Kashmir, in the Golan Heights, or in one of Africa's bloody ethnic wars. Most interestingly, it could also have been compiled from a list of behaviors observed by biologists in Africa studying the highly organized warfare of Chimpanzee tribal societies.¹ Similarly, it is likely that we would have seen this behavior if we could be transported back a million years to the African Savannah, where our ancestors roamed in search of prey, or to 3500 BC as the earliest human civilizations were laying down roots in what is now modern-day Iraq. There is a strong instinct at work here.

The biological basis for conflict is an integral part of who we are. Yet, when we talk about the violent nature of mankind, we miss the mark if we assume it to be primarily hostility between individuals. While individual competition does exist, man's true violent tendencies are tribal. This behavior, a product of enduring environmental pressures, directly impacts who we are, how we associate, and how we organize our governments.

This paper begins with a look at modern theories of environmental biology as they apply to group behavior and ends with the assertion that the world cannot unite – that we must recognize that power-based conflict and competition among groups of humans, including war, is an

¹ “A [chimpanzee] patrol is typified by cautious, silent travel during which the members of the party tend to move in a compact group. There are many pauses as the chimpanzees gaze around and listen. Sometimes they... sit quietly for an hour or more, gazing out over the “unsafe” area of a neighboring community [of chimps].” Goodall, The Chimpanzees of Gombe: Patterns of Behavior (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 490, 491.

inevitable product of human evolution. “Right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must”² – biology simply demands it. Despite this uncomfortable fact, the message of this paper is one of hope. By understanding basic human nature, and establishing the post-Cold-War world order in accordance with this nature, we may be able to reduce the violence inherent in our biology-driven conflict. Strangely enough, the more we recognize and appreciate that conflict and power-based competence are essential elements of who we are, the less likely we are to kill each other.

While the implications of these ideas run straight up to the United Nations, they are perhaps most relevant to a debate raging within the Western World today. The cultural divide between the United States and Europe, the two main centers of the West, is perhaps greatest over one single issue: war. Simply put, the United States feels the need to make it from time to time to ensure security while many Europeans think that they have found a better way – a way to render it obsolete.³ The European Union construct has effectively removed war from what was once a perpetually war-torn continent. Why not, then, extend this model to the rest of the world and eliminate war completely? Unfortunately, an impediment to this vision reaches out from the distant past – our biological instincts may well accommodate a European Union construct, but they will not accommodate its extension across the globe. As the remainder of this essay argues, millions of years of evolution simply cannot be legislated away.

² Attributed to the Greek historian Thucydides in about 400 BC. Hayward A. Alker, “The Dialectical Logic of Thucydides’ Melian Dialogue,” The American Political Science Review 82 (September 1988) 3.

³ Robert Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” Foreign Affairs, March/April 2004, 65-87.

My Self and My Species, but also My Tribe: The Uncompromising Constraints of Biology

Most human beings have only a vague notion of who their great-grandparents were and know nothing about their great-great-grandparents; we understand perhaps only the last 3 generations – less than 100 years – of what makes us who we are. Yet natural selection, brutal and efficient, and has been shaping our personalities for over 4 billion years, primarily during the past few million – over one hundred thousand generations – that our genus, Homo, has roamed the earth. We are cut off from our origins – truly “isolated in time”⁴ – with little or no understanding of where we came from or what ancient environmental fitness selections led to the desires, needs, fears, and attractions that we feel today. Though mysterious, these individual human behaviors are highly relevant as they ultimately determine how groupings of humans, be they ancient tribes on the Savannah or modern industrial nation-states in the post-Cold-War world, will act. As an example, the recent demise of Communism is testimony to the fact that the organizational structures and systems we establish to govern our world cannot be successful if they run counter to our deep-rooted and utterly compelling human nature, one aspect of which is individual competition. There is nothing inherently wrong with communism as a system for organizing economic activity – communal ownership works extremely well for ants.⁵ Communism failed because it ran counter to human instincts – ant nature is not human nature.

⁴ Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 5.

⁵ Similarities between communism and the communal nature of some insects is common. For examples, see “Sisterhood is Hungry,” *The Economist*, 23 August 1997, 62 and “The Fire Ant Wars,” *Isis*, September 2002, 377.

The most obvious basis of species survival is the propagation of genes into the next generation and the instinct to do so is strong. This instinct can be organized into two allegiances, the allegiance to *Self* and the allegiance to *Species*. All individual beings – human or not – feel this allegiance to *Self* as an intense need to ensure their own survival, as well as the survival of their genes into the next generation. Individuals that did not play this genetic favorites game long ago ceased to propagate. For example, think of how much easier it is to see children starving in a far off nation – or on the other side of town – than it would be to see your own children dying for lack of food. More quantitatively, much evidence suggests that this *kin favoritism* is a continuum, that individuals will be willing to make different levels of sacrifice for others based on their relation – say accepting a roughly 40% chance of dying to save a sibling (who shares 50% of your identical genetic makeup).⁶ The allegiance to *Species* is less direct but still a product of gene survival. A fellow human of the same sex as you shares approximately 99.9% of your DNA sequences. A chimpanzee, genetically the closest species to humans, shares 99.4% of your DNA sequences – a lemur, also a primate, shares only 77.4%.⁷ This percentage drops off quickly as we move out of the primate order. Most of us would be willing to sacrifice our own lives if it was necessary to ensure the survival of humankind – an apparently altruistic act that is simply “smart kin favoritism.”

⁶ Human “individuals can be thought of as life-insurance underwriters. An individual can be expected to invest or risk a certain proportion of his own assets in the life of another individual. He takes into account his relatedness to the other individual, and also whether the individual is a 'good risk' in terms of his life expectancy compared with the insurer's own. Strictly we should say 'reproduction expectancy' rather than 'life expectancy', or to be even more strict, 'general capacity to benefit own genes in the future expectancy'.” Excerpt from Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1990), Ch. 6.

⁷ Chimps are genetically about as close to humans as donkeys are to horses – they are closer to humans than they are to any of the other primates or than any other two species of apes are to each other. Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 276-277.

Yet there is another powerful species survival instinct in each one of us that is subtler, one that has its evolutionary origin in the fact that we are a long-lived species. The counter example of a short-lived species is instructive here. Bacteria that find themselves landing on the back of your throat during the winter cold season can double their number within about 20 minutes – a single bacterium can multiply into two million in under seven hours.⁸ As it does, millions of new DNA combinations are ‘tried out’ through DNA mutations into the next generation and gene exchanges with other bacterium.⁹ You might think that this rapid rate of evolution would have long ago allowed a species of bacteria to completely optimize itself to the environment it finds in the human body, optimized to the point that it could easily overpower your immune system. Such overspecialization, though, is perilous for a species unless it can guarantee that its environment will never change – therefore, bacteria retain the ability to change. Random changes from generation to generation in the DNA of single individuals that provide, for example, a slight resistance to a newly created antibiotic that your doctor just prescribed to you, are rapidly selected for and spread throughout the colony. Over hundreds of generations (perhaps a week or two), if the bacteria are not completely wiped out by your immune system first, they may just become completely resistant to the drug. A new strain of antibiotic-resistant bacteria is born requiring the development of a new antibiotic. Despite all of our intelligence, science, and high technology, we are locked in an ever-escalating arms race with a mindless single-cell organism; as a species it possesses a vast power, the power to evolve as fast as or faster than we can change its environment.

⁸ Alison George, “March of the Superbugs,” New Scientist, 19 July 2003, S1.

⁹ For an in-depth description, see Robert Upshall, Antibiotic Resistance (United Kingdom: Whinfield, May 1998).

The human species also possesses the power to evolve but at a much slower rate, perhaps one generation every twenty years (rather than twenty minutes). This rate is fast enough to adapt to slow changes in the environment, say lightening skin color from black to white over thousands of years to improve Vitamin D production in the skin as a civilization migrates north from Africa into Europe and has to wear more clothes (and also needs less protection from the sun). But what about environmental changes that don't take thousands of years to manifest themselves? For example, a meteorite strikes the earth "spraying fine particles into the upper atmosphere [that] darken and cool the earth [freezing a civilization's lake and killing the vegetation that it has been living off of] or a dam of glacial ice is breached, creating an inland sea where [their desert home] used to be."¹⁰ A long-lived species cannot hope to adapt quickly enough to survive such a change – therefore, it must have a built-in insurance policy.

Mankind's insurance policy, first articulated by Sewall Wright in the mid twentieth century, is centered in genetic diversity, or *genetic drift*.¹¹ This strategy, adopted by many primates, breaks the population up into many nearly isolated subgroups that develop genetic differences among them as they adapt to different territorial ranges. When the day of reckoning comes, most of these subgroups may perish but there is a good chance that at least one accidentally has the necessary adaptation to survive and repopulate the species. In Carl Sagan's words, "each small group will have a different set of hereditary propensities ... [and] when the environmental

¹⁰ Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 241.

¹¹ Sewall Wright and Evolutionary Biology (Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

disaster comes, a few ... will find themselves ... preadapted.”¹² The diversity we see in the human population, then, is simply a diversification strategy for the survival of our species. Just as a corporation that manufactures only one item (say slide rules) may find itself bankrupt when its environment changes dramatically (the calculator is invented), a long-lived species must diversify to survive.

From this survival strategy comes perhaps the least obvious – yet most relevant to this discussion – preservation instinct: allegiance to one’s *Subgroup* (in the early days of our species, an individual’s *Tribe*). Maintaining nearly isolated subgroups that rarely interbreed within a species sharing the same broad territory requires that the species develops a strong sense of subgroup allegiance – as well as a strong sense of loathing for those of other subgroups – in other words, a strong sense of ‘us’ vs. ‘them.’ Ethnocentrism, xenophobia, jingoism, chauvinism and super-patriotism are all required. The right level of hatred for other subgroups is critical to this evolutionary strategy – not enough loathing and too much mixing occurs between the subgroups eliminating genetic diversity.¹³ But how to develop loathing for a group of individuals that look and act a lot like you? Individuals must develop the capacity to exaggerate tiny differences between themselves and those belonging to other subgroups (skin color, gait, expressions, smell due to different eating habits, etc) and convince themselves that these differences actually matter. They may even have to invent distinctions if they are not otherwise readily available. The result

¹² Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 252-255.

¹³ The converse is, of course, also true. Too much loathing and the subgroups may drift apart, forming separate species. Despite strong subgroup affiliation, therefore, humans still retain the desire to occasionally mate with those of other subgroups. For an excellent discussion, see Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), Chapters 12-15.

is a biological basis for culture – the societal norms (dress, speech, foods, belief systems, etc) that subgroups have developed to accentuate the feelings of ‘us’ and ‘them’ thereby avoiding intermixing between the subgroups. These feelings persist today. Think of the horror experienced by the devoutly religious parents of a Catholic boy upon discovering that he wants to marry a Lutheran girl. “What church will the children belong to?” the parents might ask. This reaction is especially surprising given that a Hindu or a Sunni Muslim may not even be able to tell the difference between these two churches. One of the enormous benefits of culture on the Savannah was that it helped to avoid interbreeding, thereby preserving genetic drift.

The call of our ancestors on the Savannah is still strong and humans today retain an enormous capacity to exaggerate almost imperceptibly slight differences between themselves and others of a different subgroup. An alien landing on earth in 1943 would have been as flabbergasted at Hitler’s crusade to purify Europe of all but ‘pure’ Arian blood as we would be if we saw black-furred Labrador Retrievers desperately attempting to exterminate black-furred Labrador Retrievers with small white chest patches. After all, relative to the rest of the world, German Jews and German Arians look and act a lot alike – their foods, language, religions, clothes, books, furniture, wall hangings, work ethics, habits, etc appear almost identical when compared to those of, say, a Buddhist monk in Thailand. The Nazis even sent teams of researchers into the Indian subcontinent to find ‘lost’ Aryans from the great Aryan migration in 1000 BC – our species’ past survival strategy still runs deep.¹⁴

¹⁴ Himmler's Crusade: The Nazi Expedition to Find the Origins of the Aryan Race, (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2003).

Reviewing the totality of the proceeding discussion on survival instincts, we can see that human survival instinct can be described as being governed by an allegiance trinity of Self, Subgroup, and Species – *Self* encompassing the short-term struggle of individual genes against others in the human gene pool, *Subgroup* as the insurance policy that ensures genetic diversity against rapid environmental change, and *Species* ensuring the ultimate survival of humankind. While these allegiances are often in conflict with one another and make competing demands, they are deeply instinctual and cannot be ignored.

Any successful strategy for human interaction or governance must take all of these biological factors into account, as they are the foundations for much modern human behavior. For example, the success of capitalism, which reinforces the desire to excel and succeed as an individual, is a manifestation of one's allegiance to *Self* – here is the element of human nature that ultimately doomed Communism, a system that provided no incentive system for individuals who desperately wanted to improve their situation. The humanitarian spirit, so vital to our sense of decency and conscience, is rooted in our allegiance to the *Species* – here is the element of human nature that ultimately doomed the widespread trafficking of slaves as an inhumane practice.¹⁵ Finally, nationalism and tribalism are the inescapable products of our allegiance to *Subgroup* – here are the elements of human nature that will doom any attempt at world government.

¹⁵ Note that an innate desire to preserve the species in no way conflicts with the instinct to follow a strong often-authoritarian leader. For an excellent discussion, see Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), Chapters 11 and 14.

Subgroups in the 21st Century: Nations for Some, Tribes for Others

Viewed through the prism of genetic drift, it is apparent that subgroup formation and identity are basic elements of human (actually primate) nature. The human population, then, is driven to split into subgroups, which form to counter other surrounding subgroups. All subgroups, of course, need some unifying theme, something that creates a sense of ‘us’ to counter the many ‘them’'s out there – a bond created by common characteristics. Our ancestors on the Savannah, constrained by the limitations of distance and population, formed tribal and clan structures to function as their subgroups – family relations were the unifying theme. Even today, perhaps the strongest unifying theme that any subgroup can have is that of ethnicity. As the world became more populous and technology overcame the limits of distance, subgroups could be larger. With the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth century, the Western world, almost in its totality, adopted the nation-state as its primary subgroup unit – nationalism became the new word for tribal loyalty. While many nation-state unifying themes are based on ethnicity (Germany, Cuba, Iran, Japan), others are founded predominantly in religion (Pakistan, Israel) or principles/ideals (United States, India). Many include a combination of all of these factors. Today, many individuals believe so firmly in their nation-state, and the belief system that it embodies, that they will die for it – their country has become their tribe.

Alternately, many nations are artificial creations without a firm unifying theme – most people within these nations hold primary loyalty to a subgroup within the state, often one with ties to subgroups in other neighboring states. These nations must be held together by a strong central government or risk dissolution and subgroup warfare (Yugoslavia, Rwanda, China, Iraq,

Indonesia).¹⁶ The Basques in Spain and the Tamils in Sri Lanka speak “to the universal nature of the concept.”¹⁷ Samuel Huntington had the right idea when he suggested that humans form group identities in conflict with other existing groups, although, with the exception of Japan, his “civilizations” may be too broad-based to effectively describe the significantly smaller subgroups that humans appear to have a tendency to form.¹⁸

The Call of the Wild: Everyone Needs an Enemy

A unifying theme is important to create the feeling of ‘us’ but for there to be an ‘us,’ there must also be a ‘them’, an adversary to solidify the bond of one’s subgroup - this point drives straight to the heart of the issue of world government. If there are no natural ‘us’s and ‘them’s in the world, humans will create these distinctions. As a result, government at the global level on the nation-state model is simply not viable – subgroup conflict for power and resources is inevitable. The United States and European Union appear to offer examples of how human subgroups (of different ethnicities and religions) can come together to function in peace and under a common system. The fallacy of the argument lies in the external environment, the fact that they formed to counter the other subgroups around them. Would thirteen colonies in North America have come together if there were no other human beings on the face of the earth – if they were not under

¹⁶ An interesting example is evident in West Africa where “although its population belts are horizontal... the borders erected by European colonialists are vertical and therefore at cross-purposes with demography and topography... the entire stretch of coast from Abidjan eastward to Lagos is one burgeoning megalopolis that by any rational economic and geographical standard should constitute a single sovereignty, rather than... five.” Robert D. Kaplan, “The Coming Anarchy,” The Atlantic Monthly, February 1994.

¹⁷ “Nations Without States Surface To Challenge 300 Years of Calm,” International Media Corporation Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy, April 1997.

¹⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

pressure from great powers all about? Unlikely. More than likely they would have started fighting for resources amongst themselves. John Lennon's wistful dream that the "world will live as one" cannot be fulfilled, barring the unlikely event that we encounter an alien civilization to function as our adversary – until then, we must accept our providence and structure our systems appropriately.

It is no accident, then, that the strongest passions are stirred up in people when they are called to war against those in other subgroups, be they Christians crusading in the holy lands or Japanese armies invading the Korean peninsula. Caucasians thought nothing of treating Africans like animals on slave plantations in the sixteenth century and Hutus butchered hundreds of thousands of Tutsi women and children in Rwanda less than ten years ago.¹⁹ When the Chinese government decided to massacre over 2000 people in the heart of Beijing in 1989, it brought in soldiers from the 27th Army, based in the North near Mongolia, because the local 38th Army would not fire on members of their own ethnic subgroup. The 27th had no such concerns, even firing on members of the 38th who got in the way. Domination by the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires, along with a series of migrations, left the territory later to be known as the nation of Yugoslavia populated by Serbs, Croats and Muslims – ethnically indistinguishable to an outsider yet with slightly different cultures and loyalties. For centuries these three 'subgroups' have killed, raped, and driven one another from their territories. During World War II, the Nazi invasion was seen as an excuse for subgroup warfare – more Serbs and Croats were killed by each other than by the invading Germans. In the 1990s, with the dissolution of the stabilizing Soviet empire, Serbs in Bosnia took advantage of the opportunity to slaughter over

¹⁹ Vernon Loeb, "After Action Report," The Washington Post Magazine, 27 February 2000.

200,000 Muslims and Croats in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing designed to remove the ‘others’ from the territory of their subgroup.²⁰ Today Bosnia lives under a United-Nations-imposed peace but the strength of subgroup loyalty is demonstrated by a Bosnian Muslim cab driver who, when asked by a recent American delegation what would happen when the foreign troops left, smiled, gestured toward a Serbian neighborhood in Sarajevo and said “the day the peacekeepers leave is the day those men die.”²¹ Similarly, the 1884 Berlin Conference divided Africa into nation-states on a resource division basis, ignoring the tribal boundaries that actually define subgroup loyalty on the continent. Rather than recognize these boundaries, the tribes continue to war with each other with little or no regard for these artificial borders. As an example, Laurent Desire Kabila’s armed conflict in Zaire was backed by Tutsi-controlled armies in Rwanda and Burundi, against Zairian Armed Forces and ungoverned Hutu militias.²² Viewed through the prism of artificial state boundaries, this conflict appears extremely complex – on a subgroup level, it is incredibly simple. The instinctive ability of human beings to magnify tiny differences between subgroups into deadly tribal or nation-state loyalties, no matter how maladapted to today’s environment, is demonstrated the world over.

Finally, the United States offers an interesting case study. American subgroup loyalty is based only on an idea of America; anyone can join – be they originally Indonesian, German, Uzbek, Salvadorian, or whatever – if they are lucky enough to gain entry to the territory. With no

²⁰ Samantha Power, A Problem From Hell (New York: Perennial, 2003), 251.

²¹ Interview with Col Kevin Keith, USAF, National War College Faculty, on his experiences during a tour with UN peacekeepers in Bosnia, January 2004.

²² “Nations Without States Surface To Challenge 300 Years of Calm,” International Media Corporation Defense & Foreign Affairs Strategic Policy, April 1997.

obvious criteria, such as ethnicity or shared history, to define membership in the subgroup, sharp boundaries must be drawn around what it means to be a citizen – who is a member and who is not. Among the community of nations, the United States is well known for clearly defining who its citizens are and treating them very differently from its non-citizens.²³ It is common in rural newscasts, when reporting on disasters in foreign countries, to only list the number of Americans killed and to ignore the total body count – often to the shock of foreign visitors. To some extent, this phenomenon can be generalized to all open democratic systems. As Charles Tilly convincingly argues, “without a distinctive identity called citizen or its equivalent, democracy cannot exist.”²⁴ Democracies are simply reinforcing their less-than-obvious subgroup identities by creating clear divisions.

Human Nature and International Relations: What Works and What Doesn't

The preceding discussion may appear pessimistic or an affront to the ‘goodness’ of mankind but it is neither – it is merely an objective statement of human instinct and its implications. The formation of subgroups may be inevitable, conflict and competition between them may be unstoppable, but violence is not inescapable. Therefore, if Plato mused that “only the dead have seen the end of war,”²⁵ he really should have used the word ‘conflict’ instead. After all, challenging the subgroup instinct within each of us are the competing tendencies toward

²³ A stark example of this tendency is the difference in treatment of terrorist suspects captured in Operation Enduring Freedom and held at the Guantanamo Navel Base who are U.S. citizens contrasted with those who are not. As of this paper’s writing, challenges on behalf of non-citizens had made their way all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court.

²⁴ Charles Tilly, “Political identities in changing polities,” *Social Research*, 70 (2003): 2.

²⁵ There is still some scholarly debate as to the source of this well-known quote that shows up, attributed to Plato, on the wall of the Imperial War Museum in London.

preservation of self and species, the other two sides of the allegiance trinity. Rather than structure a world government on a super-state model, which is counter to our instincts and destined to fracture into conflicting subgroups, we can recognize that humans will form subgroup loyalties and structure a system in line with human nature such that these subgroups can compete for power within the world system with as little violence as possible.

The development of the code of chivalry and the triumph of the Geneva and Hague Conventions speak to the belief that humans can develop systems, conventions, and institutions that, while not eliminating conflict, attempt to make it less violent and more humane. The history of the 20th century, while bloody, demonstrates that the development of systems for peaceful competition between subgroups can reduce the body count. Approximately 100 million humans died in wars during the 20th century but Dr. Lawrence H. Keeley, a professor of anthropology at the University of Illinois, has estimated that “if the proportion of casualties [of war in the 20th century] matched those of pre-industrial society wars there would have been perhaps 2 billion” deaths.²⁶ Even at the height of subgroup conflict and hatred, international norms matter. In 1944, the uncompromising General Curtis E. LeMay told his young aide, future Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, that they would both be executed for crimes against humanity for planning the firebombing of Tokyo if the United States lost World War II.²⁷

The key to (relative) peace, then, is to establish an international system of world governance in line with human nature and its propensity toward subgroup conflict that attempts to limit the

²⁶ Natalie Angier, “Is War Our Biological Destiny?” New York Times, 11 November 2003.

²⁷ The Fog of War, Produced and directed by Errol Morris. 1 hr. 46 min. Sony Pictures Classics, 2003.

violence inherent in this conflict. To know oneself “must mean to know the malignancy of one's own instincts and to know, as well, one's power to deflect [them].”²⁸ ‘Deflect,’ as opposed to ‘suppress,’ is the perceptive element in this statement.

In setting up such a system the following invariants, or rules, are offered to ensure that the system does not run counter to our environmentally determined biology:

1. Subgroup Primacy: A world government on a nation-state model, with central executive, legislative, and/or judicial bodies, cannot hold together in the long term and will degenerate into inter-subgroup conflict, regardless of whether it is democratically ruled or not. Biology dictates that individuals feel an intense need to struggle on behalf of their subgroup against the other subgroups around them.
2. Subgroup Competition: Any system of international governance must utilize human subgroups (such as nation-states) as its base unit and allow for these subgroups to compete against each other for power and influence.
3. Subgroup Power: Power and decision-making within a system of international governance must mirror real power in the real world, primarily military and economic power. Outcomes of such a system should approximate what would happen if the subgroups actually resorted to combat (violent and non-violent). Greater military, economic, and (possibly) soft power in real terms must count more toward a nation's influence within the system than simply population.²⁹ To illustrate with an extreme example, any international

²⁸ Dr. Karl Menninger as quoted in Vogue Magazine, June 1961.

²⁹ Power can be defined as the “ability to influence others to get what you want” and Soft Power is defined as achieving this influence by “attracting followers through the strength of a country's values and culture.” Joseph

system that can, say, vote to hand over the territory of Montana to the Republic of Congo is doomed to fail as, in real power terms, the United States would block such a move rendering the decision (and the body that made it) impotent.

4. Subgroup Viability: As much as possible, base units (nations) should approximate true human subgroups with their associated loyalties. The post-colonial structure of the world renders this condition quite difficult to achieve in some regions.
5. Opt Out Threat: While power within the system must only approximate real power in the world it must approximate it closely enough that subgroups are not tempted to opt out and act against the system. Any subgroup (nation) within the system must feel that the decision reached by the system will lead to the same outcome that would occur if it chose to exercise true economic and military power to benefit its interests.

One model that will not work, then, is that of a single government, a super-empowered United Nations, whose dictates direct the world – regardless of whether it is based on one-person-one-vote or one-state-one-vote. Those promoting an international system where systemic power does not lie with those who wield true power are, sadly, on a fool’s errand. Successful models of diverse yet cohesive political entities, such as India, the United States, or the European Union, cannot be extrapolated to cover the globe – precisely because the larger they become, the fewer adversaries are left to unite them – therefore, the more tenuous their unity grows until it eventually fractures.

Nye, “Sell It Softly; Persuasively promoting American values and culture will work better than either carrots or threats to influence the Middle East,” Los Angeles Times, 25 April 2004, M2. See also Joseph Nye, Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

Authority and Power: The Structural Problems of the United Nations

On January 7, 1943, during his State of the Union address, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, referring to the group of countries that we today call ‘The Allies’, told Congress that the “cause of the *United Nations* (italics added) is moving forward at last in Europe, Asia and Africa.”³⁰ At the end of the war, the victorious ‘United Nations’ solidified their relationship through the establishment of several worldwide organizations, the most prominent of which took their chosen name. All members nations (today 191, almost all of the world) were given a vote in the General Assembly, as well as a chance to rotate through one of six (later increased to ten) voting positions on the Security Council, the only entity of the organization that wielded any military might. The effect is that of a Congress with each nation given one Congressman. The only allowance given to differing power relationships between the members is in the Security Council. The five major allies, Great Britain, the United States, France, the Soviet Union, and China established themselves as permanent members of the Security Council with veto power in addition to their single vote. In practice then, all member nations have equal power with the exception of the five permanent members of the Security Council who have equal power to each other but considerably more power than non-permanent members. Any one of the permanent members can block action if it so chooses.

It is clear that the United Nations of the early 21st century, while still a very useful forum for discussion and collective action among member states, cannot function in the role of an

³⁰ Charles E. Gloverwar, “Roosevelt predicts big gains for Allies against Axis in 1943,” The Atlanta Constitution, 10 January 1993, Living Section, 5.

international government, as it does not abide by the *Subgroup Primacy*, *Subgroup Power*, or *Subgroup Viability* invariants listed above. As a result, it constantly falls victim to the *Opt Out Threat* as powerful nations ignore its rulings. As a former National Security Advisor put it in a recent speech: “Authority must reside where the power is.” In the General Assembly of the UN, Gabon has as much voting power as the United States; in the Security Council, France has far more power than India, Japan, and Germany combined. While the model of five equals standing above a parliament of other equals may, discounting the surprising inclusion of France and China, have roughly reflected the balance of power in 1945, it quickly became outmoded as nations changed their power relationships in real terms. Former American U.N. Ambassador Richard Williamson describes the power situation in the Security Council as “one superpower, one emerging power and three collapsed powers.”³¹

Power within the United Nations system simply does not reflect power in the real world – the result is an institution impotent on the world stage without the consent of the world’s “Hyperpower” (the United States) on every issue and the cooperation of the other great powers on any issue that impacts their regional spheres of influence.³² For example, Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar decried that the United Nations was ignored during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and when the Israeli army smashed through Lebanon’s weak southern defenses to occupy large portions of the country.³³ In the 1980s, with Iran and Iraq ignoring the United Nations’ pleas and continuing to slaughter each other, Iran’s President Khamenei signaled his

³¹ Helle Dale, “U.N. Reform,” [The Washington Times](#), 11 November 1993, Editorials.

³² In French “Hyperpuissance,” a term coined by Hubert Vedrine, France’s outspoken Foreign Minister, to describe the United States’ unrivaled dominance in the post-Cold-War world.

nation's contempt by referring to the Security Council as "a paper factory for issuing worthless and ineffective orders."³⁴ From 1955-1992, the United Nations passed 65 resolutions compelling the state of Israel to some action or another, not one of which was ever followed – the United States was powerful enough to block any action to enforce them.³⁵ In 2003, America's war against Iraq went on, despite the opposition of 3 permanent members and the majority of the general assembly. Most damningly, the United Nations was ignored when it took a stand on Cambodia's Killing Fields, Bosnia's events "tantamount to genocide" and Rwanda's machete-wielding tribesmen.³⁶ While seen as a valuable institution for multi-national policy implementation and an effective forum for discussion among nations, a model for an effect world government, the United Nations is certainly not.

The end of the Cold War provides an opportunity to revisit this system, to either endorse or replace it – the distance of history will illustrate that radical change is the only successful course available to us. Many voices in the world today call for the nations of the world to begin to cede their sovereignty to the United Nations – in fact many already see the United Nations' pronouncements, and 'International Law,' as superceding laws developed within their own nations. It is only a matter of time, they say, before the world unites under this magnificent world government, a government that will rule the world in peace and prosperity for all time. As

³³ "Who Says U.N. Is a Flop? Its Boss," U.S. News & World Report, 20 September 1982, 12.

³⁴ "Gulf War," The Economist, 26 September 1987, 50.

³⁵ Fahd al-Fanik , Amman Al-Ra'y, 30 March 2003. (Jordanian Arabic daily of widest circulation; partially owned by the government. Article translation owned by the 2003 Financial Times Information Global News Wire.)

³⁶ The first Bush administration's description of the conflict, as covered in Samantha Power, A Problem From Hell (New York: Perennial, 2003).

enticing as it sounds, this fundamentally flawed path leads only to disappointment, despotism, and failure – as we have seen, the very essence of what it means to be human stands squarely in the way. Those who see the nation-state ceding sovereignty to the United Nations are neglecting human instinct. Proven over and over, humans are bound to think in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ subgroup loyalty will not cease to exist, and decision-making in the world must follow the reality of real-world power between the subgroups – otherwise the disaffected party simply ignores the pronouncements and carries on.

Conclusion: Try to Avoid, but Always Be Ready for, War

This paper has attempted to make the case that the formation of tribe-like subgroups is a basic human instinct, genetically encoded in each one of us in order to maintain the survival benefits of genetic drift. As a result, humans feel a compelling need to belong to a group, to be part of an ‘us,’ and to pit their group in conflict against other groups, the ‘them’s. Human qualities seen as positive, such as culture and patriotism, as well as highly negative attributes, such as racism and hatred, are the biological mechanisms by which our species maintained these subgroup identities in pre-historic times. Unfortunately they survive today. The implications of these ideas to world government are profound for they suggest that subgroup conflict, be it between tribes or nation-states, is a fact of life and no higher authority will be able to form to stop it.

The decisions, therefore, that define our future will be made in Washington, Beijing, Brussels and New Delhi – perhaps even Tehran or an Afghan cave – but not in New York by the United Nations. The question is not whether or not conflict will occur, only how violent will it be and what can we do to minimize this violence. Our international governing structures should accept

this reality. Efforts to cede sovereignty to the United Nations in its present form, to transform it into a world government, are exceedingly dangerous and will eventually lead to fracture and war.

The closest that we can get to a world government is a system in which nation-states “vote” with decision-making power that reflects that individual state’s military and economic power in real terms – the goal being to minimize the amount of violent conflict required to establish outcomes in the international order. The end of the Cold War provides an opportunity to move closer toward such a system. As stated by President George W. Bush, we may now have “the best chance since the rise of the nation-state in the seventeenth century to build a world where great powers compete in peace instead of continually prepare for war.”³⁷ If we are to attempt this feat, we must recognize that ideals cannot trump a human nature that evolved over millions of years and may take millions more to change. We must structure the international system accordingly for, as human beings, we cannot ignore the long reach of our long-forgotten ancestors.

³⁷ Cover Letter, The National Security Strategy of the United States (September 2002).