

Alan Wolfe's *Political Evil: What It Is And How To Combat It*:

By Michael Ignatieff

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Evil is a moral problem for everyone, difficult to acknowledge in ourselves, hard to understand in others and difficult to defeat without committing lesser evils. Liberals—I count myself as one—have a special problem with evil, connected to our particular form of self-regard. Liberals like to believe we are tolerant but evil, by definition, cannot be tolerated. We believe that politics ought to be deliberative but we can't deliberate with evil. We think compromise can be honorable but there are no honorable compromises with evil. We think politics ought to be governed by reason, but evil doers, while they may reason, are not reasonable.

Alan Wolfe, a distinguished and prolific professor of political science at Boston College, and author of more than twenty books, including *The Future of Liberalism*, has written a dispassionate guide to these quandaries. He distinguishes between evil in general and political evil in particular, and argues that we should think politically about evil because the evil that we can actually do something about is a form of politics and can only be defeated if understood as such.

There is plenty of evil out there, he points out, which has no politics at all: adolescents slaughtering other adolescents at a high school, predators molesting children, loners acting out fantasies of revenge and empowerment with automatic weapons. Our various therapeutic and explanatory discourses still leave us without consolation in the face of these murderous frenzies but, Wolfe argues, we should at least spare ourselves the foolish idea that such evil lurks in all our hearts. The Norwegian killer who sprayed bullets over children at a liberal party summer camp was a psychopath. He is not us and we are not him. He tells us nothing about Europe, about Norwegian society, about anything. It accords him a dignity he does not deserve to explain him. It is appropriate to mourn and remember and it would be prudent to keep him locked up for good. It is an utter waste of time to give him significance.

Political evil—genocide, massacre, terrorism, ethnic cleansing—is another matter. Here, Wolfe argues that we are dealing with motives, intentions,

which while repellent are political. Killing all Jews is not crazy: it is a plan that will make you master of all you survey. Expelling everyone unlike yourself is not insane: It guarantees eternal domination for your kind. Terrorizing a people you cannot defeat in battle is not pathological: It may force your enemy to yield.

So, Wolfe's first lesson is a very old one, but worth repeating. There is method in apparent madness. The world is not divided between a sane world of deliberative politics and an insane world of apocalyptic violence. It is all politics, all the way down. To call a terrorist attack "senseless" is merely to admit that you have not understood its purpose.

| Wolfe's second lesson is that all political evil is not the same. It comes in different shades and hues, and it is vital to maintain distinctions between horrible behaviors. Massacre is not genocide. Ethnic cleansing is not genocide. Everything is what it is and not another thing.

Moral precision is a precondition for political precision. Nothing is gained, and much is lost, if, in seeking to mobilize opinion to stop a massacre, you call it genocide. You debase the coinage of outrage. Next time you cry wolf, no one will believe you.

We are indiscriminate in our use of the language of evil, Wolfe argues, because we like what the language does to our own moral standing. It makes us self-righteous. To call others wicked is to give us a moral privilege we may not deserve and a moral permission we are likely to misuse. The language of good and evil only seems to create moral clarity: It actually creates moral entitlement.

Moral clarity mobilizes: Who does not want to enlist on the side of good against absolute evil? But clarity also anaesthetizes. If I am on the side of good, they on the side of evil, what I am not permitted to do? The authors of President Bush's torture memos claimed the privilege of moral superiority after 9/11 and used it to justify torture.

Politics, Alan Wolfe wants us to understand, is not a morality play. Our world is not divided into the forces of light and the forces of darkness, the good and the evil, the righteous and the damned, the saved and the sinners. In a world understood politically, all motives are mixed; all intentions are impure, and the teams on the field of international politics do not reliably

divide into good guys and bad. All victims are not innocent, all perpetrators are not without justifying motive; and all properly political solutions to the problem of evil involve supping with the devil and eating with a long spoon.

Speaking of the devil, not all evil doers are Lucifer incarnate. Some are just thugs and it gives them a grandeur—and also a strategic importance they do not deserve—to call them evil. Most evil, like most politics, is strictly local. It may be heinous, but it does not threaten us. We need to discriminate. International politics is not a battle with Lucifer. It is a struggle against thugs, and Wolfe argues we should devote our attentions to those who threaten us or our friends and forget about the rest.

If metaphor encourages a failure to discriminate, so does the misuse of historical analogy. Saddam Hussein was not Hitler. Milosevic was not Stalin. Darfur is not Auschwitz. Clinton was not Chamberlain. Contemporary evil is bad enough. It has no need of historical frames that do not fit. To repeat, everything is what it is and not another thing.

We need to set aside moral frames of good and evil that assign our politics—and our military—tasks they cannot accomplish; we need to stop seeing international politics as a morality play in which our role is to back innocence and victimhood against malignity and viciousness; we need to counter the politics of violence with a politics that drains evil doers of support and drives them to the margins. We need the inner discipline and self-knowledge to refuse the temptations of believing that we are always on the side of the angels. Wolfe asks us to fight evil with the restraint of adults, not with the certainty of adolescents:

“Politics does not ask that we eradicate evil from the dark hearts of men and women. It does demand that when faced with tactics that threaten our way of life in the pursuit of political goals, we at least make an effort to understand why those goals were chosen in the first place. Fighting evil with evil contaminates, but fighting politics with politics does not.”

It is when Wolfe moves on from these general sentiments, which seem both admirable and true, to detailed examples of “fighting politics with politics,” that the questions about his approach begin to arise. What would Wolfe do differently? No to the war in Iraq certainly, no to the torture memos. That much is obvious, but on other issues, his skeptical liberal realism is less clear

as a guide to action than he supposes. Is Wolfe saying no to intervention in Libya, on the grounds that Gaddafi, while a thug, posed no strategic threat, and his crimes, while vicious, did not rise to a level that had to be stopped? Is Wolfe saying no to an intervention in Darfur, on the grounds that the killings did not rise to the level of genocide?

Going back in time, what does Wolfe think we should have done about ethnic cleansing in the Balkans? Wolfe wants us to understand that everybody was doing it, not just the Serbs. The Croats, the Bosnian Muslims, later the Kosovars: Everybody wanted to cleanse everybody else. Evil was not confined to the Serbian regime. The question is: What difference does this make? Those who believed Milosevic had to be stopped did not suppose he was Lucifer, did not believe he was the only guilty party, did not believe his victims were helpless innocents. They just thought he should be stopped. The uncertain, fragile but enduring peace of Dayton that was imposed once Milosevic was stopped proves they were right.

Fighting the politics of evil with politics certainly beats fighting it with drones, targeted assassination, and ground troops, but Wolfe's advice may be a council of perfection, correct in theory but impossible to apply in practice. What politics, exactly, is supposed to marginalize and dismantle the Taliban's nefarious hold in the Hindu Kush? America is heavily reliant on drones and targeted assassination in part because negotiations have gone nowhere, campaigns to win hearts and minds have run into the sand and a democratic politics is in ruins in Kabul.

Wolfe argues as if the only obstacle that prevents us from successfully confronting political evil is our own moral self-righteousness. He has done a thorough job chastening our pride, but our pride is not the only problem. Stopping people who will stop at nothing takes force. The problem remains if and when to use it.

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