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News
from
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PUBLISHED BY KNOPF SEPTEMBER 29, 2011:

POLITICAL EVIL

What It Is and How to Combat It

by Alan Wolfe

In an age of genocide, terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and torture, evil threatens us in ways radically different from tsunamis and financial panics. Nature unleashes its wrath and people rush to help the victims. Evil shows its face and we are paralyzed over how to respond. In this timely and eye-opening book, Alan Wolfe argues that in a world of partisan blame-assigning, therapeutic excuse-making, and theological question-dodging, we need to take a serious look at the use of evil means to obtain political ends.

“Wolfe brings the theological problem of evil to bear on politics and political wrongdoers from Hitler to Dick Cheney,”

says *Kirkus Reviews*.

“Political evil is all around us,” writes the author, and the headlines would certainly seem to bear him out. That evil comes in four flavors: terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide and what Wolfe calls *counterevil*, which he defines as ‘the determination to inflict uncalled-for suffering on those presumed or known to have inflicted the same upon you.’

“Wolfe considers George W. Bush’s response to Saddam Hussein to be a hallmark example. Political evil has a cause, he writes, and that cause would seem almost always to be the accumulation and retention of power. This is distinct from the ‘apolitical evil’ that dominates the headlines: the Columbines and murderous mothers and Beltway snipers that haunt our dreams. Such evil is often characterized by a sort of glee in a madman’s gleaming eye. In the instance of political evil, it is possible to see that glint—as Wolfe writes, ‘However much they differ from each other, Eric Harris, Adolf Hitler, and Osama bin Laden all took unseemly pleasure in the harm they caused others’—but the process is often anonymous and bureaucratic.

“Cheney, apologist for and practitioner of evil, comes in for a particular drubbing on that score; Wolfe asserts that his devotion to waterboarding and invasion was meant to scare ‘civil libertarians and Democrats’ as much as the nation’s external enemies. Replacing Cheney’s theory of government as nemesis, Wolfe writes, is necessary ‘if the United States is to come to terms with its experience of counterevil.’”

ALAN WOLFE teaches political science at Boston College, where he is the director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life. A contributing editor of *The New Republic* whose work appears frequently in leading magazines and newspapers, he is the author or editor of more than twenty books, including *The Future of Liberalism*.

ISBN 978-0-307-27185-3

\$27.95

