



# BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER  
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

## **Author Meets Critics:** ***Political Evil: What It Is and How to Combat It***

A Conversation with **Alan Wolfe**,  
*Director of the Boisi Center and Professor of Political Science, Boston College*

and Erik Owens  
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Owens: How do you distinguish among the types of evil you see in the world?

Wolfe: My book is about a specific kind of evil: evil used for political and strategic ends. There is lots of evil that has no political character whatsoever, like people who shoot up schools like in Columbine, Colorado, or post office killings. Some forms are mixed. For example, Nadal Hassan at Fort Hood, Texas—maybe it was political, or maybe he was just crazy. The “beltway snipers,” I think we can consider them completely crazy rather than having a political objective. (Even though some people said, because of his name, that John Muhammad had an Islamic objective, but I don’t think it’s true).

Ultimately I’m not a psychologist. I can’t look into people’s heads, and as I say in the book: acts are easier to change than people. I don’t know what motivates people to do evil things, and I’m not sure we’ll ever know. I think it’s endlessly fascinating, but if we’re going to be concerned with political evil, then we should look at what people do and not who they are.

Owens: What led you to take up this question?

Wolfe: Well, it was actually a very specific thing. I received an email from Jeffrey Herf, who teaches history at the University of Maryland, trying to get people to sign a liberal hawkish petition called the Euston Manifesto. They wanted liberal intellectuals who supported the general idea of U.S. intervention to promote

human rights abroad to stop really awful regimes. I looked at it, read it, and thought, *I'm in general sympathy with this*, but something still bothered me. I just couldn't bring myself to sign it. And then I spent the next six years thinking about it, writing a book that answered why I couldn't sign that email.

The basic idea behind this manifesto, and behind a lot of the thinking that I was wrestling with, was the notion that we've seen evil before—it took the form of totalitarianism with Hitler and Stalin—and that what we're witnessing is another replay of that in the world today. The manifesto went on to criticize the left for standing by and not doing anything when those evils appeared in the past so as to not make that mistake again. It said: *We're going to recognize evil, label it correctly from the beginning, denounce it and do everything we can to stop it.* That all seemed absolutely true; who could argue with it? The general tone of it was something I sort of supported, but the more I began to think about it, I thought, *Wait a minute, is Milosevic a Hitler? Is the Rwandan genocide like Nazism?* At this point, the questions started following.

Owens: Your case against misplaced analogies really exemplifies the book's broader argument that how we name things, how we describe events, has enormous moral and political implications.

Wolfe: Right. The book is about language and how we use it. Samantha Power's book, *A Problem from Hell*, is important for individuals concerned about naming. We refused to name things genocide when we should have, and then later that became opposed by the fact that we were naming things 'genocide' too often. The politics of naming has gone to the other extreme.

Owens: Can you give examples of when it has gone to the other extreme?

Wolfe: I found myself just simply not agreeing with a lot of the "Save Darfur" rhetoric. I thought that what was going on in Darfur (and still is to some degree, although to a much lesser extent) is tragic, cruel and can be seen as the product of a vicious leader named Omar al-Bashir. However, to call it genocide just didn't correspond with everything I was reading about what was actually happening there.

Owens: How do you distinguish between *sui generis* "totalitarian evil" that you say we've misplaced in analogies, and the Bashirs/Milosevics who you call "politically evil"?

Wolfe: Calling them politically evil doesn't necessarily mean that they are less evil. They are tyrants who do horrible things to their people, but I think Milosevic and Bashir were not threats to world peace in the way Hitler was. To call them politically evil is, I think, a more effective way of trying to stop them than just

labeling them as evil. That is because when you label them as evil, you paralyze yourself. We can't eradicate evil from the hearts of men. We can't end evil. Once you proclaim those goals, you are setting yourself up to fail, or maybe you never wanted to succeed. I think we need to lower our sights a little bit, realize that they are engaged in political actions, and try to stop them on that level.

Owens: You write in your book that political evil aims for achievable goals. What do you mean by that?

Wolfe: Political evil involves strategically pushing an achievable goal. Hitler's goal to exterminate the world's Jews was, fortunately, not achievable. Stalin's goal to create a classless society was also unachievable. Can you create a Serbia that's overwhelmingly Serbian? I think you can. It's a goal that used horrible means achieve, but it was achievable. Did the terrorists who bombed the World Trade Center achieve some of their goals? If they wanted to draw the United States into a war in Afghanistan the way they had drawn Russia into the war in Afghanistan, then yes, they achieved them.

Owens: What happens if you do come across someone you consider to be politically evil today? How does your book tell us we should respond to them?

Wolfe: There are examples of political evil in the world today. Once we identify them, we have to think about how to stop them. For example, I think that Israelis are threatened by political evil; the goals of the two major terrorist organizations, Hamas and Hezbollah, are to just absolutely kill Israeli citizens in order to get what they want. That's evil and beyond the laws of normal organized terrorism.

When terrorists from the Gaza Strip attacked, threw bombs at Israeli cities like Sderot, and killed civilians, that was absolutely political evil. What should Israel do about that? Well, they have a leader, Benjamin Netanyahu, who happens to have written two books about evil and has very pronounced views about it. But, I think they are the wrong views. Wanting to turn the conflict into a crusade of good against evil, Israel reacted with Operation Cast Lead with an evil of its own. It blockaded an area and imposed disproportionately cruel costs on innocent people. And so Israel found itself, at least in world opinion, judged to be on the same level as the evil it was fighting. And maybe Israel doesn't care, but it should, because world opinion is a part of what we call soft power. Israel's position has been weakened because it responded to political evil in the wrong way.

Owens: One of the striking themes of your book is that, when thinking about political evil in the world, we needn't worry ourselves about the psychological or philosophical

foundations of their wickedness. Why not try to understand the foundations of their evil?

Wolfe: I'm certainly personally interested in the philosophy, metaphysics, and theology of evil. I teach a course about it, and I love to read books like Shakespeare's *Richard III* and ponder about what made him evil. So, I'm not trying to discredit the importance of those aspects of evil. I'm just saying that if we want to think about what kind of policies we should develop in the world, we need first to come down from that high and absolutely fascinating level of philosophical and theological analysis.

Owens: How would you respond to the Clausewitzian idea that war is politics by other means? Do you see the things that you lay out as political evil, like terrorism, as a form of politics, or is political evil something not *political* in that sense?

Wolfe: No, the things I'm concerned about are political. Terrorism, even suicide terrorism, is very political. University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape has pointed out that terrorism is motivated by strategic choices. What is really horrendous about terrorism, genocide, and ethnic cleansing are the means used to achieve their ends. We recognize the political ends: while ethnic cleansing is deplorable and ought to be condemned, a lot of people are tempted to create an ethnically pure nation. In American history, we engaged in ethnic cleansing to create a state when we conducted Indian removal. This shows that we have to be careful about the kind of distinctions we make, that ethnic cleansing isn't just genocide by another name.

Owens: Another important insight that you have in the book is the need to stop a sort of dangerous dualism in the world that you trace back to Manichaeism. Where, besides the genocide conversation, have you seen that sort of radical dualism at work?

Wolfe: The way in which the war in Iraq was sold to Americans had aspects of this. Saddam Hussein was being portrayed as the essence of evil. And again, I can't repeat enough: Saddam Hussein was without doubt an evil man, a cruel and vicious tyrant. Without doubt, both the world and Iraq are better without him. But having said all of that, generally we ought to fight wars when we're going to fight them about things that do involve our own strategic and national interests; we should not be engaged in metaphysical wars. My problem with the metaphysics of evil is that when it gets into the language of our president, as it did with George W. Bush, it totally distorts what a state can do. At least for the United States, this is the form of political evil that has most directly affected us, and that's where the Manichean language is most evident.

Owens: Extreme language is also used for actions on behalf of good things like interventions to stop killings and needless wars; it motivates people. If you take away this extremity, how do you expect to motivate Americans to action without the language that they've become accustomed to?

Wolfe: It's a good question. One possible answer is that if we really need to resort to that extreme language, we shouldn't be doing it in the first place. For example, one of the single biggest problems that we're still wrestling with, as a result of Iraq, is that the United States never had a legitimate place there. The reason the Bush Administration lied about it was because it didn't have anything else to offer. If you as the leader cannot get public opinion behind in intervention in another country, then maybe you shouldn't be intervening. And to clarify, I didn't believe we should have been intervening in Iraq; I thought it was a mistake.

Another answer involves making a case based on human rights. It might be hard to do because Americans, especially after these failed wars, are now very, very reluctant to intervene. So a situation may arise where we really should be intervening, and we simply can't get the Americans involved. Do you then exaggerate evil in order to achieve the 'good end?' In my mind, the inclination where we're seeing now is that if you're going to have to exaggerate, then maybe you should take a pass.

Owens: The *New York Times* review of your book that recently came out focused on your "return to realism." I wonder how you would square the political and moral realism that emerges in your projects, because at times they support one another and at times they are in deep tension.

Wolfe: I already wrote in a book that I don't consider myself to be an amoral realist. If by realism they mean the Niebuhrian variant, I'm happy to be in that camp. I've always read Niebuhr as both a moral realist and a political realist. For Niebuhr at least, political realism tempered his moral realism and vice-versa.

I really do strongly reject Kissinger and even Jeanne Kirkpatrick's forms of realism in the book, even though I didn't persuade that reviewer. In the case of Niebuhr everybody argues that he would have supported the war in Iraq. I could see an argument that he might have, although I don't think he would have. But we're left with a lot of ambiguity in the territory that he operated on.

Owens: Terrific, thanks for talking with me.

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