

Sinister Times And What to Do

WSJ wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052970203687504577002200420265564

November 3, 2011

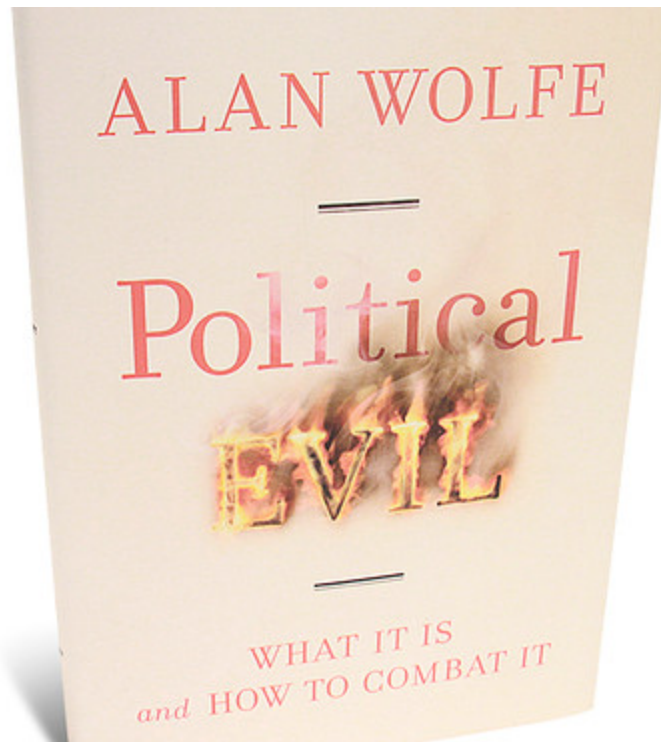
By Peter Berkowitz

In "Political Evil," Alan Wolfe issues a compelling summons to moral and intellectual seriousness and conducts a multi-pronged and, for the most part, soberly argued inquiry into the contemporary forms of political evil and the proper means for combating them. More is the pity that he indulges in ill-informed and intemperate accusations that American conservatives and Israel are perpetrators of political evil.

A professor of political science at Boston College, Mr. Wolfe knows that political evil—"the fundamental question of the twenty-first century"—is as old as politics. But he concentrates on what he believes are its leading modern forms: terrorism, ethnic cleansing, genocide and torture. He chooses that focus because superficial opinions about the death of ideology and the end of history have induced complacency about adversaries. And utopian delusions about U.S. military and diplomatic capacities to right wrongs, he adds, have fostered recklessness and arrogance.

Mr. Wolfe defines political evil as "the willful, malevolent, and gratuitous death, destruction, and suffering inflicted upon innocent people by the leaders of movements and states in their strategic efforts to achieve realizable objectives." The threat has been multiplied of late by the growth of the modern state, staggering improvements in the power of weapons, and increasing access of non-state actors to technology that enables them to kill in mass numbers.

The author frames his inquiry with a critique of St. Augustine's classic philosophical explorations of evil and Hannah Arendt's controversial "Eichmann in Jerusalem." While he admires Augustine for rejecting the Manichean division of the world into forces of good and evil, he faults the theologian for claiming that our wills are inherently corrupt and always suspect. Such a view, Mr. Wolfe fears, encourages political quiescence.



Arendt, who wrote her dissertation on Augustine, sparked an impassioned public debate when, in articles originally commissioned by the New Yorker, she reported from Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961 that the defendant, a chief administrator of the Nazis' Final Solution, was an ordinary human being, "terrible and terrifyingly normal," who demonstrated the "banality of evil." Mr. Wolfe objects to Arendt's psychologizing of evil: By focusing on Eichmann's supposedly unexceptional personality, she deflected attention from the defective political ideas and institutions that allowed him to supervise the slaughter of six million Jews and the want of political thought and action that might have averted or reduced the killing.

Mr. Wolfe honors his admonition to concentrate on the political dimension of evil. He reaches many reasonable conclusions—often at odds with progressive opinion—about how better to confront it by examining ethnic cleansing in the Balkan wars of the 1990s, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the efforts by a Spanish criminal-court judge in 1998 to prosecute Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, and the brutal civil war that broke out in Darfur, Sudan, in 2003. We must not leap to analogize all political violence to the Holocaust, he counsels, particularly ethnic cleansing. Not every decision to refrain from military intervention reeks of the British and French appeasement of the Nazis. The invocation of "high moral principles," he says, can be driven by "self-interested prejudices."

Because international tribunals that prosecute war crimes lack democratic legitimacy and suffer from corruption and mismanagement, Mr. Wolfe argues, local citizens, customs and institutions must be empowered to pursue justice. And universal jurisdiction—the doctrine by which criminal courts in one country assert the right to prosecute war criminals anywhere and everywhere—undercuts the democratic accountability of both courts and the accused.

Suffusing Mr. Wolfe's argument is a salutary admonition to a kind of intellectual hygiene: "If we are to do our best to limit the consequences of political evil we cannot rely on sloppy historical analogies, amateurish psychological speculations, discredited theological apologetics, political oversimplifications, rigid ideological categories, and tired moral platitudes." How true. And how disappointing to find, when it comes to the fight against Islamic terrorism led by American conservatives and Israel, that Mr. Wolfe's book abounds in such failings.

He relentlessly condemns the Bush administration's alleged "decision to fight evil with evil" and to pursue a "no-holds-barred war on terror." In fact, despite the mistakes the Bush administration made in confronting the novel and difficult legal questions that arose after 9/11, no major power at war has barred more holds and given greater attention to the law of armed conflict. Of the complex legal and strategic issues at the center of the controversy over coercive interrogation Mr. Wolfe appears oblivious.

And he accuses Israel of acting evilly, "having lost whatever advantage it once had over its terrorist enemies" by, among other things, using disproportionate force against Hamas terrorists in the three-week Gaza operation that began in late December 2008. Mr. Wolfe relies, in part, on the United Nations' Goldstone Report, an investigation that accused Israel of deliberately targeting civilians. Yet the report is comprehensively flawed. Its factual findings are unreliable, and its legal findings are invalid: They are based on bad information and on the misapplication of the fundamental law-of-war principle of proportionality. The report's very mission conflicted with international norms that assign to accused states primary responsibility to investigate war-crime allegations. Mr. Wolfe notes that even the man who headed the investigation, South African jurist Richard Goldstone, has disavowed his report's marquee accusation, but neither man recognizes the report's pervasive inadequacies.

That Mr. Wolfe lapses into crude attacks on those favorite bogeymen of progressives—American conservatives and Israel—illustrates how hard it is to maintain the intellectual care and fair-mindedness that he rightly stresses are critical to our ability to understand and contain political evil.

Mr. Berkowitz is a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.