

**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,*



cide, 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.

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