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# The Essence of Evil

Susan Jacoby: *Wild Justice: The Evolution of Revenge*; Harper & Row; New York.

Joe McGinniss: *Fatal Vision*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

by Daniel J. O'Neil

These two very different books are linked by a common theme—coping with evil. Jacoby presents a philosophical-historical view of revenge, and a case for its utilization under certain guarded conditions. McGinniss tells the story of Captain Jeffrey MacDonald, the Green Beret doctor who was convicted of murdering his wife and two children. It is a grisly tale presented with all the skills of a first-rate investigative reporter. Jacoby approaches her topic in the abstract while McGinniss approaches his in the concrete. Both move onto the stage where man confronts evil.

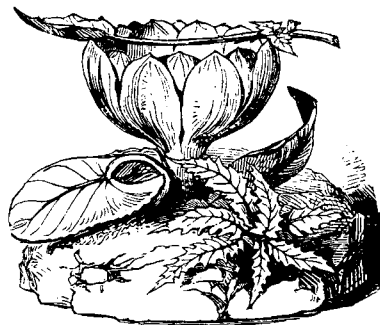
Contemporary America, based on Enlightenment, Liberal-Democratic precepts, has a problem in coping with evil. History has been basically kind to the American citizenry. We have enjoyed abundant resources, impressive opportunity, and spectacular mobility. During 200 years we suffered only one civil war, our foreign wars have been against weaker foes and, until quite recently, successful. During the two 20th-century World Wars, while reaping the fruits of victory, we experienced nothing akin to the European casualty rates. Our domestic politics has been marked by continuity and legitimacy. The American constitution is the oldest written one in continuous usage and the totalitarian ideologies that have undermined so many political systems have failed to thrive. Our major domestic problem of race and poverty—when placed in a historical and comparative perspective—seems amenable to solution. Especially

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indicative of the American success story is the barrage of immigrants seeking legal, quasi-legal, or illegal entry. And America's most strident domestic critics seldom opt to leave. It might be argued that such success can make a people oblivious to evil, that it deprives them of a sense of the tragedy of human existence. Have we paradoxically been deprived of spiritual insights allowed less fortunate peoples who have experienced suffering? Were the 19th-century Slavophiles perhaps correct in linking spiritual insight to suffering? The perceptive Solzhenitsyn notes how suffering enabled him to recognize evil, to reject the transient, and to embrace genuine traditional values.

To cope with evil, one must first recognize it. This involves having a norm of virtue/goodness against which to measure suspected evil. Our less secular forebears possessed such a norm and hence were in a position to identify and abjure evil; or if and when they succumbed, they recognized their sin. Our secular, relativistic,



pluralistic society apparently lacks such a norm. What the ancients labeled as *evil*, we often label as *maladjustment*, *sickness*, or perhaps *challenge*. In contemporary American society virtually anything goes if it's done in the proper style and justified with the proper code terms: doing one's thing, alternate life-style, questioning authority. What was condemned yesterday may indeed become chic today—abortion, unisexuality, drugs. Or what is legally denied the

masses today, might be openly enjoyed by the adversary cultural elite and the Georgetown cocktail circuit. Recognition of evil is far from a simple task.

We live in a society that wants evil to appear unambiguous. It craves an Armageddon with the saints on one side and the demons on the other. It wants our allies to be paradigms of virtue, human rights, and progressive social commitment, and our adversaries to oppose these attributes. Our allies must be without sin and our adversaries without virtue. Our classical and Christian forebears knew better. They recognized that neither men nor institutions were sinless and that the most sinful often possessed a strain of virtue. Hence, maneuvering in this world of mixed virtue and vice is not without difficulty and risk.

Even when recognized, evil cannot readily be *explained*; the relationship between evil and its cause presents problems and opportunities. If one rejects the most logical and natural causal relationship, virtually any connection can be construed. To take a pedestrian example: a boy aims a ball and wantonly breaks a window. Those who wish to excuse the boy can blame, among others, the boy's parents who allowed him out unsupervised, the homeowner who failed to guard his house, the politicians who did not provide an accessible playground, the ball manufacturer, or indeed the entire society for the environment it created.

The ambiguity associated with causation allows an "out" for the professional activists. It is difficult to pin them down and then to hold them responsible for the ramifications of their doctrines. "Liberated" Vietnam offers but one case of causation conjuring. Few Vietnam-era doves accept responsibility for the boat people. One would assume that people who endured French, Japanese, and American hegemony without flight must have experienced a vision of hell to flee their ancestral home. But those who re-

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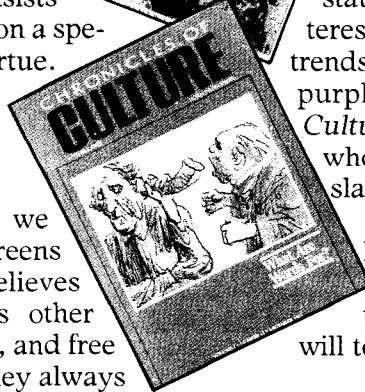
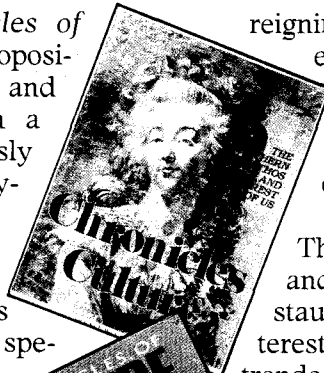
# Intellectual and moral elegance are not out of fashion...

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fuse to face the reality blame the victims (afraid of an austere life-style), China (encouraging ethnic conflict), or the United States (the cause of all Southeast Asian tragedies).

**W**hen Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries secure power, eliminate the non-orthodox members of the revolutionary coalition, and turn their societies into gulags, inevitably foreign observers emerge who, after reluctantly admitting the reality, attribute it to the opponents of the Marxist-Leninists. The brutalities of the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, and Vietnamese Communist regimes are blamed on their anticommunist adversaries, which provoked the regimes into taking such actions.

One of the most pathetic cases of domestic causation-conjuring related to the Kennedy assassination. Virtually everyone had a vested interest in avoiding hysteria and, indeed, Johnson handled the succession with grace and prudence. Still, the facts were that the President had been murdered by a military deserter who had absconded to the Soviet Union, had married a Russian, and later involved himself in pro-Cuban lobbying. The facts notwithstanding, some blamed the conservative city where the crime occurred and the conservative voters who sought greater domestic vigilance. Conservatives had somehow created the environment that provoked the gunman.

When evil is recognized and exposed and the causation problem surmounted, a problems of response remains. There exists a spectrum of opportunities and temptations. One can ignore the evil and hope optimistically that it will eventually disappear. One can conveniently place it outside of one's arena of concern contending that it is someone else's responsibility. Thus, generations of Americans recognized the evil involved in racial segregation but assigned responsibility to the "proper" agency and the "proper" time. Was it any surprise that the courts and bureaucracy eventually filled the vacuum?

Many Western Europeans who per-

ceived nazism as evil incarnate hoped that it would moderate with time or that Hitler would turn east to satisfy his territorial lust. Similarly, many contemporaries await—despite the overwhelming evidence—a communism with a human face and hence acquiesce in communist expansionism. Others fear that too aggressive a response could lead to a nuclear holocaust. A prominent media lawyer has publicly stated his commitment never to acknowledge human-rights violations in the socialist states. This attitude maintains that one can be cognizant of evil but opt to tolerate and soft-pedal it because of the perceived ramifications associated with its exposure. One can learn to coexist with it not only out of lethargy, but also because of fear of greater evil stemming from its exposure. Such nonaction is not to be totally despised. Indeed, the Burkean precept—better the known than the unknown evil—is not totally lacking in merit. Much depends upon the available alternatives, perceived ramifications, and existing resources. Unfortunately, it is not within the power of any generation to obliterate evil.

**A**nother approach to evil involves accepting the reality but urging that it be analyzed objectively, i.e., explained. The evil must be placed in a historical and comparative perspective. It is to be made intelligible and thus to some degree forgivable. Thus nazism—probably the most unambiguous 20th-century evil—is linked to World War I, the draconian peace, the depression and inflation, the collapse of a state and society. The result is that, evil as nazism was, the people who voted for it emerge less guilty. This same "examining the roots" process is utilized for the more contemporary revolutionary regimes. It involves emphasis on the conditions before the revolution: colonialism, poverty, socialization in inferiority and cultural contempt. The resulting revolutionary and postrevolutionary barbarities thus appear as reaction to provocation.

In addition to movements, individuals

guilty of committing horrendous crimes must be explained. Hence the minute concern with every phase of their activity: toilet training, sexual preference, dietary habits, kinship ties, frustrations, etc. The villain's movements are pinpointed with excruciating meticulousness; his biography is researched with the diligence reserved for the truly significant. We probably now know as much about Charles Manson and Captain MacDonald as about many American Presidents.

In contrast to those who ignore evil and those who focus primarily on explanation are those who romanticize. Evil possesses an attraction and fascination for such people since it involves a contempt for the taboos binding lesser men, a willingness to gamble, and a sense of grandeur. Faust, the Marquis de Sade, and Lucifer himself have never lacked disciples and imitators. The great historical tyrants have their apologists and revisionists. No doubt someday Hitler will have his admirers who will cite his contempt for bourgeois morality, his skill, his daring, and the scale of his ambition. Lenin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh have already been enshrined in certain pantheons.

There is a venerable American tradition of romanticizing evil notables. Many Puritan colonials espoused the doctrine of the Fortunate Fall. Hollywood popularized the legends of the Western gunslingers, the Eastern gangsters, and the great robber barons; all of these flawed heroes "questioned authority" and seized what they wanted without regard for conventional morality or procedural niceties. While their end was usually tragic, their romanticized careers were not without redeeming virtues.

The romanticization of evil often assumes the form of the cult of violence. The cult usually espouses the belief that society is so corrupt that only violence will redeem. Violence will purify and enable the evolution of the "new man": "You must break the eggs to make the omelet"; "The New Order, like childbirth, must come with blood and pain"; "Every time I hear the word *culture*, I reach for

my revolver." The Byronic leader embraces violence to destroy the corrupt and to create a purified order. Sorel, the fascists, and the communists have espoused some rendition of this myth.

Another approach involves recognition of evil together with a conscious effort to ally with it. This can be justified as a Machiavellian strategy to defeat an even greater evil, e.g., "Better Stalin than Hitler." Or one forges an alliance with evil supposedly in order to control or moderate it and to seek some higher good. One senses its ascendancy and hopes to limit its impact. Thus many German democrats supported Hitler's Enabling Legislation and numerous European progressives linked with the communists in popular front movements. Today, Marxist-Leninists can always find

democrats, social democrats, and nationalists to join national liberation fronts, despite the bleak fate suffered by previous Marxist-Leninist collaborators. Despite the best of intentions, alliance with evil involves the risk of corruption or worse.

Finally one can expose, confront, and resist evil. This perhaps is the most difficult course. One risks being labelled a fanatic, a bore, or a Manichean who categorizes everything into simplistic colors of black and white. This course usually entails consequences: the exercise is time-consuming, demanding, and will be misunderstood. Often one must break with the conventional wisdom and the spirit of the age. Victory is by no means assured. Many who opted for this response to evil have been canonized as saints, but only long after death. □

## Consequences of Misused Terminology

**Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin: *Why the Jews?: The Reason for Antisemitism*; Simon & Schuster; New York.**

by Will Morrissey

The authors identify "the first recorded reference to Jews in non-Jewish sources" as a report an Egyptian king caused to be written 1200 years before Christ. "Israel is no more," it boasts. Israel has proved somewhat more resilient than this early critic estimated. The futility of Jew-hatred, which obviously has a long history, results primarily from the strengths of Jews. Those strengths cannot originate in unrefined nature, for no one imagines Jews to be physically stronger than others, and few today posit an innately superior Jewish intellect. They must come from Judaism itself.

Traditionally, Jews have regarded this source of their strengths as the real

object of Jew-hatred. But, as the authors observe, many contemporary explanations of anti-Semitism explain the haters without serious reference to the hated. Scapegoating, economic envy, prejudice, and psychosis may tell us something true about anti-Semites, or they may not. What the explanations presented do not tell us is, why *the Jews*? They lead us to Sartre's conclusion, duly cited, that Jews were invented by anti-Semites.

The authors defend the traditional understanding that Jew-hatred is about Jews, not merely about hatred and haters. Judaism provokes anti-Semitism, a variant of evil, in at least three ways: by challenging the validity of the non-Jews' god(s), laws, and national allegiance; by exhorting Jews to act to change the world, not only contemplate it; and by teaching the chosenness, or divine election, of Jews. The authors also make a fourth, much more dubious suggestion. "As a result of the Jews' commitment to Judaism, they have led lives of a higher quality than their non-Jewish

neighbors"; better educated, more temperate, more charitable, with stronger families, Jews provoke resentment. The evidence presented that Jews do enjoy such advantages may convince, but without evidence that non-Jews somehow recognize these advantages the argument fails. *Mein Kampf* contains no hint that Hitler resented Jewish virtues, or even recognized them as such. The dilute anti-Semitism we all encounter asserts Jewish peculiarity and inferiority, except in anything involving money. Fortunately, this quality-of-life argument disappears after it is made.

The book's second half contains a survey of Western religions and ideologies, in chronological order, showing their relation to the three plausible provocations to anti-Semitism. The authors contend that Judaism differed from the ancient religions by insisting on its validity for all peoples, denying the imperial relativism Malraux praises when he writes, "Rome welcomed into its Pantheon the gods of the defeated." Furthermore, they say that ancients who disliked the contemplative universalism of the early philosophers could scarcely tolerate the active universalism of Jews, and the doctrine of chosenness exasperated even the sturdy Tacitus.

Later religions imitated Jewish universalism and therefore opposed Judaism all the more vehemently.

If Judaism remained valid, then Christianity was invalid. Therein lie the origins of Christian hatred of the Jews, the most enduring Jew-hatred in history.

A Christian must reply that Jesus teaches hatred of sin and the love of sinners—including alleged "Christ-killers." Insofar as one follows Christianity, one cannot accept the Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah, the Jewish rejection of the Gospel. But a Christian cannot extend his rejection of these aspects of Judaism to a hatred of Jews themselves and remain fully Christian. That many Christians sin by making just that exten-

*Mr. Morrissey is author of Reflections on DeGaulle (University Press of America).*