

WAR ON EVIL

By Robert Wright

Evil has a reputation for resilience. And rightly so. Banishing it from Middle Earth alone took three very long *Lord of the Rings* movies. But equally deserving of this reputation is the *concept* of evil—in particular, a conception of evil that was on display in those very movies: the idea that behind all the world's bad deeds lies a single, dark, cosmic force. No matter how many theologians reject this idea, no matter how incompatible it seems with modern science, it keeps coming back.

You would have thought St. Augustine rid the world of it a millennium and a half ago. He argued so powerfully against this notion of evil, and against the whole Manichaean theology containing it, that it disappeared from serious church discourse. Thereafter, evil was not a thing; it was just the absence of good, as darkness is the absence of light. But then came the Protestants, and some of them brought back the Manichaean view of a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil.

The philosopher Peter Singer, in his recent book *The President of Good & Evil: The Ethics of George W. Bush*, suggests that the president is an heir to this strand of Protestant thought. Certainly Bush is an example of how hard it is to kill notions of evil once and for all. On the eve of his presidency, in a postmodern, post-Cold War age, “evildoers” had become a word reserved for ironic use, with overtones of superhero kitsch. But after September 11, Bush used that word earnestly, vowed to “rid the world of evil,” and later declared Iran, Iraq, and North Korea part of an “axis of evil.”

So what's wrong with that? Why do I get uncomfortable when he talks about evil? Because his idea

of evil is dangerous and, in the current geopolitical environment, seductive.

Some conservatives dismiss liberal qualms about Bush's talk of evil as knee-jerk moral relativism. But rejecting his conception of evil doesn't mean rejecting the idea of moral absolutes, of right and wrong, good and bad. Evil in the Manichaean sense isn't just absolute badness. It's a grand unified explanation of such badness, the linkage of diverse badness to a single source. In the *Lord of the Rings*, the various plainly horrible enemy troops—orcs, ring-wraiths, and so on—were evil in the Manichaean sense by virtue of their unified command; all were under the sway of the dreaded Sauron.

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For the forces of good—hobbits, elves, Bush—this unity of badness greatly simplifies the question of strategy. If all of your enemies are Satan's puppets, there's no point in drawing fine distinctions among them. No need to figure out which ones are irredeemable and which can be bought off. They're all bad to the bone, so just fight them at every

pass, bear any burden, and so on.

But what if the world isn't that simple? What if some terrorists will settle for nothing less than the United States' destruction, whereas others just want a nationalist enclave in Chechnya or Mindanao? And what if treating all terrorists the same—as all having equally illegitimate goals—makes them more the same, more uniformly anti-American, more zealous? (Note that President Ronald Reagan's “evil empire” formulation didn't court this danger; the Soviet threat was already monolithic.)

Or what if Iran, Iraq, and North Korea are actually different kinds of problems? And what if their rulers, however many bad things they've done, are still

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human beings who respond rationally to clear incentives? If you're truly open to this possibility, you might be cheered when a hideous dictator, under threat of invasion, allows U.N. weapons inspectors to search his country. But if you believe this dictator is not just bad but evil, you'll probably conclude that you should invade his country anyway. You don't make deals with the devil.

And, of course, if you believe that all terrorists are truly evil, then you'll be less inclined to fret about the civil liberties of suspected terrorists, or about treating accused or convicted terrorists decently in prison. Evil, after all, demands a scorched-earth policy. But what if such a policy, by making lots of Muslims in the United States and abroad feel persecuted, actually increases the number of terrorists?

Abandoning such counterproductive metaphysics doesn't mean slipping into relativism, or even, necessarily, dispensing with the concept of evil. You can attribute bad deeds to a single source—and hence believe in a kind of evil—without adopting the brand of Manichaeism that seems to animate Bush. You could believe that somewhere in human nature is a bad seed that underlies many of the terrible things people do. If you're a Christian, you might think of this seed as original sin. If you're not religious, you might see it in secular terms—for example, as a core selfishness that can skew our moral perspective, inclining us to tolerate, even welcome, the suffering of people who threaten our interests.

This idea of evil as something at work in all of us makes for a perspective very different than the

one that seems to guide the president. It could lead you to ask, If we're all born with this seed of badness, why does it bear more fruit in some people than others? And this question could lead you to

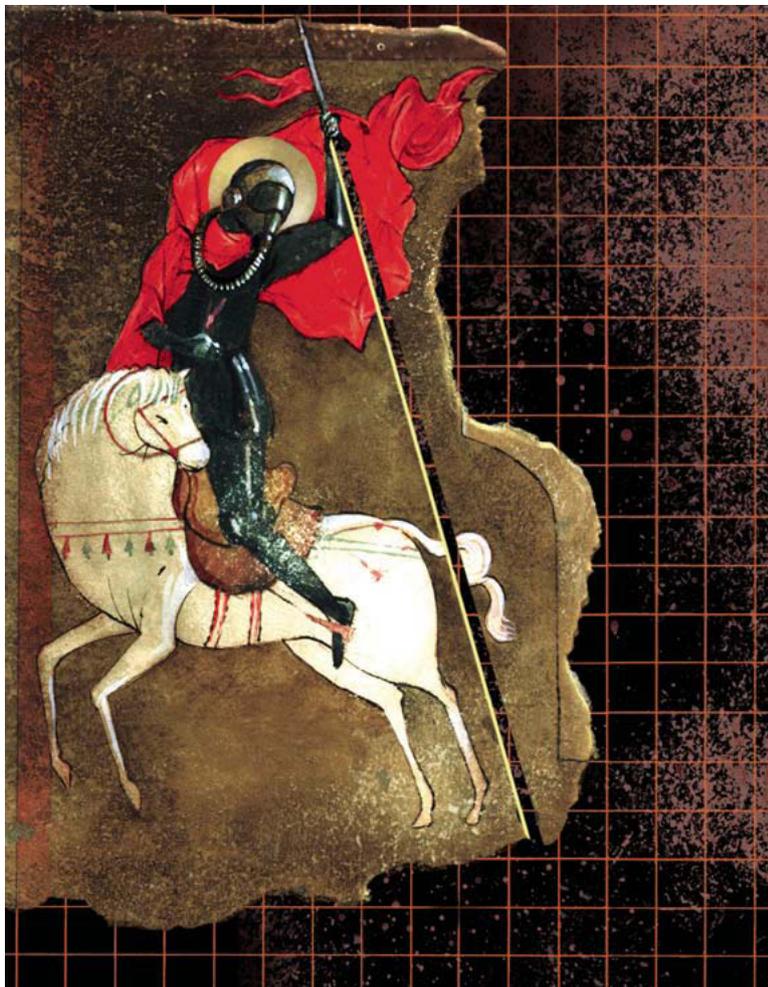
analyze evildoers in their native environments, and thus distinguish between the causes of terrorism in one place and in another.

This conception of evil could also lead to a bracing self-scrutiny. It could make you vigilant for signs that your own moral calculus had been warped by your personal, political, or ideological agenda. If, say, you had started a war that killed more than 10,000 people, you might be pricked by the occasional doubt about your judg-

ment or motivation—rather than suffused in the assurance that, as God's chosen servant, you are free from blame.

In short, with this conception of evil, the world doesn't look like a *Lord of the Rings* trailer, in which all the bad guys report to the same headquarters and, for the sake of easy identification, are hideously ugly. It is a more ambiguous world, a world in which evil lurks somewhere in everyone, and enlightened policy is commensurately subtle.

Actually, there are traces of this view even in the *Lord of the Rings* films. Hence the insidious ring, which can fill all who gaze on it with the desperate desire to possess it, a desire that, if unchecked, leads to utter corruption. The message would seem to be that, thanks to human frailty, anyone can play host to evil—hobbits, elves, even, conceivably, the occasional American. **FP**



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