

How to deal with evil

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Assume you were on a ship that sank in the middle of the ocean. You, your family and 200 fellow passengers manage to reach a small isolated island where you think you can survive. Assume this happened before the advent of satellites, aircraft, and modern communications. This made it a rescue unlikely for many months, or perhaps years.

A fellow passenger turns out to be a thug who has recruited several other thugs to work with him. The thugs kill five of your fellow passengers without provocation. The rest of you try to decide what to do. Several passengers advocate getting together and killing the thugs. Several others argue killing is wrong and that you should do nothing because you cannot be sure the thugs will kill any of the rest of you.

Others want to reason with and thereby "contain" the thugs. Those who favor containment argue it is wrong to kill the thugs since they have not said they will definitely kill any of the rest of you. But, since they might, you should try to contain them.

As an individual, you need to decide which group of passengers you should support. Before deciding, you try to think through the consequences of each alternative. If you join the pacifists and it turns out the thugs suddenly have a change of heart and stop killing, then all the remaining passengers will be safe until rescued. But what if you join the pacifists and the thugs keep on killing? How will you feel, particularly, if they start killing members of your own family?

If the risk of joining the pacifists seems too high, you might consider joining those who argue for containment. Given the island has no materials for building a jail, containment will have to be provided by groups of passengers large enough to protect themselves, watching the thugs at all times.

In darkness or bad weather, it will be very difficult if not impossible, to make sure all the thugs do not escape from the defined containment perimeter. If a thug escapes, everyone will be at risk, particularly the women and children.

If you don't want to risk the women and children, as well as your own life, you may decide to join those who want to kill the thugs. This alternative also is not without risks. Though there are enough nonthug men to overpower and kill the thugs, some good men may be killed or injured in the struggle.

Good people have faced real versions of the above parable since the dawn of civilization. Unfortunately, evil exists. History teaches if evil is not stopped, many good people will be killed. If all nonevil people were pacifists, there would be no pacifists.

The record of trying to contain, rather than destroy, evil is mixed. Again, history shows containment can work for short periods but is unstable. Ultimately those contained find ways to get out, and either evil triumphs or good destroys evil.

When Ronald Reagan took office, he understood the containment strategy of the early Cold War years no longer worked. The Soviets were

expanding around the globe and building up their military. Mr. Reagan, unlike many in the establishment, realized we would win or lose. He set out to win.

How he did so is vividly portrayed in a riveting new movie, "In the Face of Evil." The movie is quite remarkable because the producers have managed in a documentary to capture the tension of the Cold War with the heart-stopping effect of a good action movie. "In the Face of Evil" is exciting, entertaining, thought-provoking and never boring.

The movie is a good history lesson that causes viewers to think about a profound issue. To win, Mr. Reagan realized the battle had to be waged not only on the military front, but also on technological, economic, psychological and moral fronts to avoid a nuclear conflagration. He understood the necessary tradeoffs, such as the relative risk of a larger deficit compared to risks of insufficient military capability or an economy strangled by excessive taxation.

Our current presidential election is, in part, a battle over conflicting risk analysis. The Kerry Democrats lean more toward trying to contain evil. The Bush Republicans lean more toward trying to destroy evil. Either alternative entails real human costs. The Kerry approach might save more U.S. military lives in the short run. But history shows such a strategy puts many times more civilian and military lives at risk in the long run.

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