



"Evil is powerless if the good are unafraid."
—Ronald Reagan

27-Aug-10

Evil Is Real (Part One)

Back on March 8, 1983, at an Orlando, Florida, meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals, the President of the United States at the time, Ronald Reagan, gave a speech amid an ongoing Congressional debate over a proposed "nuclear freeze," a policy advocated by the Soviet Union. His comments made national and international news because he had the audacity to call the Soviet Union "an evil empire," referring to communism as "the focus of evil in the modern world." Many of us whose memories stretch back that far remember the furor of the media's reaction to his statement. Because he dared to call another nation "evil," Reagan was, according to opponents, the worst person who had ever lived.

First, the press derided him for his simplicity. How could he reduce the Cold War to such black-and-white terms—to the altogether silly notion that "They" are evil and "We" are good? That is what they claimed he implied, although the text of his speech proves otherwise. Then, after deriding him, they chided him for being judgmental, saying that the U.S.S.R. was not evil, just different from America and opposed to our ideas of "good government." Then, they called him "bellicose" and "dangerous," implying that he was trying to provoke the Soviets into war. To his credit, Reagan did not back away from his remarks.

A significant criticism of liberalism is that liberals rarely consider actual outcomes—thatis, they often promote a course of action without studying how such actions have worked out in the past or in similar contemporary situations. Not wanting to repeat this mistake, we should consider what resulted from Reagan's identifying the Soviet Union as "an evil empire": Ultimately, the West, led by the United States, won the Cold War!

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Certainly, the process was not quite as simple as that, but his speech "alarmed moderates of the West, delighted millions living under Soviet oppression and set off a global chain reaction that many believe led inexorably to the fall of the Berlin Wall and to freedom for most of Eastern Europe" (Frank Warner, "New Word Order," *The [Allentown, Pennsylvania] Morning Call*, March 5, 2000, p. A-1).

It was by defining the enemy in stark terms and facing the problem realistically that Reagan's America brought down the Evil Empire of the Soviet Union. In 1989, the Berlin Wall indeed came down, and the Soviets watched helplessly as their superpower status slipped away in less than a decade. Even today, more than twenty years later, it is still desperately trying to regain its lost territories, its defanged military, and its lost influence and prestige—and it is slowly gaining them back. Nevertheless, Russia has been sidelined and diminished for a generation.

Can we Christians learn a lesson from this?

In contrast, during the 1990s, America experienced an administration that considered every matter from a post-modern viewpoint, that is, a way of looking at things in which no absolutes exist. There is no right. There is no wrong. According to this philosophy, every belief and opinion is equally valid because each person determines for himself what is true. Unlike Reagan, President Bill Clinton failed to identify and define America's enemies in realistic terms. In fact, America did not have any enemies during his administration—unless they were right-wing religious fanatics and domestic militias. These were the only people the Clinton administration dared to tar as "evil"—because conservatives and the religious right opposed nearly everything it attempted to do.

In terms of international relations, America's military activities were mere "conflicts" fought before making those on the other side our friends. So, we sent our armed forces to Haiti, Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo, and many other places—in fact, up to his time, Bill Clinton sent more military personnel to fight in foreign lands than any other President in history. Worse, they went to those places with few clear objectives and ended up staying for extended periods. America's military was often part of a multinational, humanitarian "Meals on Wheels" effort, a kind of foreign aid at the point of a gun. Few of those soldiers, happily, came home in body bags.

As in Reagan's example, the effects of his stance did not manifest themselves until a few years later. America did not feel the full consequences of Clinton's "conciliatory" approach until he was out of office. While America's soldiers did not return home in body bags due to Clinton's forays into international relations, ironically, the nation was less fortunate at home.

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By failing to recognize and identify—and fight—evil for eight long years, the United States paid the piper when about 3,000 American civilians died in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania in the attacks of September 11, 2001. The evil that went unrecognized and unnamed was radical Islam. By failing to make a moral judgment about it, our leaders failed to anticipate how its hatred for America would reveal itself. In not taking it seriously, the nation did not have its guard up against it, did not prepare for it, and so suffered from it.

People are still grieving over this tragedy, and they will be grieving for the rest of their lives because an American administration—and, to be frank, much of the nation in support of it—would not make a judgment about evil. Regrettably, the subsequent Bush administration called for a "War on Terror," playing semantics to avoid "offending" and "radicalizing" Muslims, and the Obama administration has continued and compounded the farce by renaming the war the "Overseas Contingency Operation." The whole world still finds itself beset by radical Islam, enduring the penalty of failure to identify and eradicate the evil of Muslim terrorists.

In these examples resides a spiritual lesson for everyone who is a Christian, and a few questions can help to delineate it: Is evil real to us? Do we believe in evil? Can we recognize it? Do we know how evil works? Are we aware of the forms that it takes? Do we realize that we are in an all-out war against evil? Are we prepared to fight that war?

Sun Tzu, a Chinese military strategist of many centuries ago, wrote a book called *The Art of War*. It is now frequently used as a textbook on how to fight one's way to the top of the ladder in the cutthroat business world. However, he did contribute one remarkable yet simple maxim that applies to this lesson. He wrote, "Know your enemy."

How can a person fight an enemy about which he knows nothing? He cannot—in fact, he will be slaughtered on the battlefield! For starters, he will not even realize he is in danger! Once he gets his nose bloodied, he will not know how to react to his enemy. He will not know his enemy's strategies or tactics. He will be totally ignorant of his numbers, his weaponry, and his experience. A person who does not know his enemy will quickly suffer ignominious defeat.

Do we know our enemy? Do we recognize that we are in a fight for our lives? Do we appreciate how *real* evil is? We will consider more on this next time.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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