'Political Evil,' by Alan Wolfe: review
Glenn C. Altschuler, Special to The Chronicle
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Political evil
What it is and how to combat it
By alan wolfe
(Alfred a. knopf; 339 pages; $27.95)

More than other presidents, George W. Bush insisted on "moral clarity" in American foreign policy. According to one researcher, he mentioned the word "evil" in 30 percent of the speeches he delivered in his first two years in office. In the battle between good and evil, the president proclaimed in his farewell address in January 2009, "there can be no compromise. Murdering the innocent to advance an ideology is wrong every time, everywhere. Freeing people from oppression and despair is eternally right."

Born of remorse over the appeasement of Adolf Hitler and hatred of communism, this Manichean approach "will no longer do," insists Alan Wolfe in "Political Evil," because it replaces a neglect of evil with an obsession over it. A professor of political science at Boston College, Wolfe distinguishes political evil from evil in general, examines examples of genocide, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and "counter-evil" around the world, and makes a learned, lucid and gutsy appeal for responses grounded in a recognition that excessive moralizing can cost lives rather than saving them; responses that combat evil by engaging it, while holding evildoers accountable for their crimes.

Insatiable global ambitions
Although at times hyperbolic, Wolfe's analysis of the terms used to define political evil and the consequences of using them is always thought-provoking. Implying total control, and insanely insatiable global ambitions, totalitarianism, Wolfe agrees, is an appropriate characterization of Adolf Hitler's Germany and Josef Stalin's Soviet Union. But the conditions that spawned totalitarianism in the 1920s and '30s - World War I, hyperinflation and Depression - "are unlikely ever to be repeated." When applied to 21st century tyrants, as it frequently is, the concept does not account for "on-the-ground political realities," including struggles over land, money and power.

Dependent on a totalitarian model that is no longer sustainable, analogies to appeasement, Wolfe maintains, are often equally inaccurate and dangerous. As they attacked the idea of negotiating with Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, he points out, Time magazine, the New Republic, Newt Gingrich and liberal New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis conjured up images of British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, willing to pay any price for peace, averting his gaze as Hitler gobbled up Austria and Czechoslovakia. Milosevic's actions in Bosnia were evil, Wolfe acknowledges, but the analogy, supplemented as it was by references to the Holocaust, "inflated a regional conflict into a moral tale of twentieth century tragedy."

In much the same way, according to Wolfe, apocalyptic responses to "the evil of ethnic cleansing" get in the way of effective diplomatic and military action to contain it. Although ethnic cleansers may be evildoers, he writes, the goal can - and sometimes does - resonate with the ideal of national self-determination retaining "a democratic, and even at times, idealistic appeal." There is "little question," Wolfe indicates, that Israel engaged in ethnic cleansing in 1948. Or, to complicate matters even further, that Franjo Tudjman, the president of Croatia, paid no price for his ethnic cleansing because all the blame was put on Milosevic.

GIVEN wide variations in currently existing nation-states, Wolfe believes that there is no magic bullet to resolve ethnic conflicts; it would help, he thinks, if Western powers encouraged efforts to include different ethnic groups in one state rather than assuming that every "people" deserves its own nation.

Genocide or civil war?
Although he agrees that genocide is the "great political evil of our era," Wolfe warns that dramatizing it - or invoking it indiscriminately - can dull the moral imagination or, even worse, if what appears to be genocide is actually a civil war, make it more difficult to find a political solution.

Foreign policy should have a moral dimension, Wolfe reminds us, in the conclusion to a terrific and timely book. But, if we're not careful, and we don't temper moral absolutism with ethical realism, we're likely to become smug and self-righteous. We may well forget that foreign policy "is always about politics and that politics demands flexibility."

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