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This is written, even more than many of my other pieces, to provoke thoughts and comments. Please let me know what comments and thoughts you have.

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COMMENTARY

Palaima: The evil that men do lives after them

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The ancient Athenians used public dramas, known as tragedies, to look at problems they had to face. These plays were the centerpieces of yearly festivals that all citizens received payment to attend. They could see one another as they watched the performances in a big open-air theater. They could share their reactions afterward.

In spring 415 BCE, right after the Athenian citizenry had ordered their soldiers to commit genocide, the citizen soldiers of Athens watched "The Trojan Women," a play about Greeks committing genocide after the fall of Troy. We have no record of what they thought and felt.

Two movies just opened that pose questions we all need to think about. Clint Eastwood's version of James Bradley's "Flags of Our Fathers" (2000) recreates the battle of Iwo Jima and how a single action there by simple men was heroized for Americans back home. In Kevin Macdonald's version of Giles Foden's 1998 novel "The Last King of Scotland," Forest Whitaker portrays Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. We see Amin through the eyes of a simple everyman character, a young Scottish doctor who has come to Africa haphazardly to do humanitarian medical work and accidentally becomes Amin's personal physician.

I did not use here any adjectives to describe genocide or what American and Axis soldiers did to each other during the Second World War. Movies such as "Saving Private Ryan," "Schindler's List" and "Hotel Rwanda" have shown us these things. Film images and descriptive terms such as brutal, hellish, monstrous, barbaric can be multiplied forever. They do no good unless we understand what we are confronting: an old-fashioned thing called evil.

We either use the term evil without thinking or think we shouldn't use it at all. What did our president accomplish when he called Iraq, Iran and North Korea the "axis of evil"? He trivialized evil.

Compared to the real axis powers two generations ago, the bad things done by these countries are feeble. Just contemplate the magnitude of the crimes against humanity of the 11 major Nuremberg defendants sentenced to be hanged 60 years ago this month.

My University of Texas colleague Philip Bobbitt once wrote to me expressing his understandable disgust for comparisons made between civilian casualties during our war in Vietnam and the number of innocent people who died on 9/11. Yet evil operates on a sliding scale. This is a fact even if we are uncomfortable thinking or talking about it.

In "The War of the World," historian Niall Ferguson remarks, "The Second World War was the greatest man-made catastrophe of all time." As for genocide, it took many Germans to build and run an efficient system to murder 6 million Jews and about 3 million human beings from other social and ethnic groups. We know these things. Iran, Iraq and North Korea are far away. So, comedians use "axis of evil" as a joke, and our laughter isn't even nervous.

But evil is no joke. According to a contemporary news report, "just mentioning the name Idi Amin" in Uganda in 2002 was "enough to cause fear to both the old and young." Amin was then nearly 80 years old and had been in exile for 23 years.

Many of us shy away from calling things evil on intellectual grounds. We associate good and evil with categorical religious beliefs. Moreover, looking at war or genocide tarnishes the good guys. Former British foreign office minister David Owen thought it disgraceful that we did not act to remove Amin from power. Owen had proposed assassinating him.

When we debate estimates of Iraqi civilian casualties, we see that war in any form makes even the good side complicit in harming innocents. This knowledge is so disturbing to us that we use the euphemism "collateral damage" to soften its impact.

It is also hard to call people and what they do evil because we are so used to compromising in our daily lives. Compromise, in its good sense of meeting people halfway, is arguably the chief (and now forgotten) art citizens and leaders in a democracy must know and use. But evil is uncompromising.

In Vietnam, My Lai was evil. Of all the soldiers at My Lai on March 16, 1968, few had the uncompromising moral courage of Hugh Thompson. Thompson, who died in January, forcefully intervened to stop his fellow soldiers from massacring old men, women, children, babies. He later explained, "I didn't want to be part of that. It wasn't war."

Others, however, succumbed to a mode of thinking that William Eckhardt, chief military prosecutor of William Calley in the My Lai courts martial, came to know too well: "Evil doesn't come like Darth Vader dressed in black, hissing. Evil comes as a little bird whispering in your ear. 'Think about your career. I'm not sure what's going on. We'll muddle through.' "

If and when you see "Flags of Our Fathers" and "Last King of Scotland," or read the books on which they were based, contemplate evil, and consider what it means that Calley, after spending three years in house arrest, one month for every 10 villagers he killed, at last report was married and working at a jewelry store in Columbus, Ga.

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SURVEY RESULTS

QUESTION: Do you agree or disagree with the decision of the military court which found (Lt. William) Calley guilty (in connection with the My Lai incident) and gave him a life sentence?

Agree	7%
Disagree	78%
No opinion	15%

From a telephone survey of 1,090 adults from across the United States conducted for President Nixon on April 1, 1971.

QUESTION: Do you think President Nixon should free Lt. William Calley, substantially reduce his sentence, or uphold his life imprisonment sentence (in connection with the My Lai incident)?

Free Lt. William Calley	51%
Substantially reduce his sentence	28%
Uphold his life imprisonment sentence	9%
No opinion	12%

From a telephone survey of 973 adults from across the United States conducted by Opinion Research Corporation for President Nixon on April 5-6, 1971.