

RONALD REAGAN, ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EVANGELICALS  
("EVIL EMPIRE SPEECH") (8 MARCH 1983)

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**Abstract:** This essay argues that Ronald Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech helped transform presidential discourse with its explicitly religious language and imagery. Credited with helping to bring about an end to the Cold War, the speech was widely criticized at the time for its religious and moral absolutism but later celebrated for reflecting a rhetorical blueprint that helped bring an end to the Cold War.

**Key Words:** Ronald Reagan, "Evil Empire," Cold War, Détente, Religion, Evangelical

When Ronald Reagan took office in early 1981, the United States appeared weak and faltering. In foreign affairs, the United States, still reeling from defeat in Vietnam, faced not only a Soviet Union expanding into Afghanistan but also a major hostage crisis in Iran that had crippled the outgoing president, Jimmy Carter. It seemed as if America's self-image as a confident and strong international superpower was fading into a distant memory. Indeed, Carter's speeches and public pronouncements as president seemed to contribute to this growing public perception.

As a conservative and as an outspoken anti-communist, President Ronald Reagan not only brought about a shift in presidential policy but also in presidential rhetoric. Known as the "Great Communicator," Reagan's powerful oratory, liberally peppered with anecdotes and humor, helped gain public support for his two main issues—anti-communism and reducing the size of the federal government.

Reagan's speech to the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) on March 8, 1983, was arguably his most significant and memorable speech on international affairs. This address employed religious imagery and themes that placed many of his administration's policy initiatives, particularly diplomatic ones, in an explicitly moral context. In fact, the speech has been known ever since by the morally charged label that Reagan used to criticize the USSR in his remarks: "evil empire."

This essay examines the significance of the "Evil Empire" speech in several ways. First, it seeks to put this speech into the historical context of Reagan's past and of Cold War politics and diplomacy. Second, the essay shows how this speech played a role in changing the framework of Cold War policy and rhetoric. Third, it demonstrates how Reagan's religious and moral worldview impacted his rhetoric as well as his foreign policy. While debates continue regarding the political impact of Reagan's "Evil Empire"

speech, commentators—now and then—agree that the speech helped transform public discourse and actions both in the United States and abroad.

*Reagan: From Actor to Politician*

Ronald Reagan was the product of the American heartland during the early part of the twentieth century. Reagan grew up in Dixon, Illinois, a small town in the north central part of the state. His father, Jack Reagan, was a theatrical, flamboyant man from an Irish-Catholic background. Rarely able to find steady employment, his father struggled from job to job during Reagan's childhood. Not helping matters, Jack Reagan gained a reputation for both gambling and drinking problems. While Reagan may have gravitated in later life towards his father's theatrical style, his father seemed to have served more as a cautionary tale for Reagan.<sup>1</sup>

Not atypically, Reagan's mother Nelle took charge of his spiritual education. Reagan was raised as a Protestant in the Disciples of Christ denomination. Historian William Pemberton notes that the denomination "preached an optimistic theology that placed humanity's destiny in human hands and that promoted a belief in progress and a desire for reform." The denomination also "assumed that capitalism and the middle-class work ethic were fundamental parts of Christ's message."<sup>2</sup> Many of the core values and beliefs espoused by Reagan throughout his life and during his presidency stemmed from his mother's influence and example and reflected her spiritual background.<sup>3</sup>

Immediately after graduation from Eureka College (itself founded by the Disciples of Christ), Reagan honed his communication skills through a series of radio announcing jobs. Reagan, like other announcers of the time, would often do the play-by-play broadcast of a baseball game he did not even attend by relying upon nearly instantaneous updates by telegraph. Because listeners were unaware of this practice, Reagan ran into trouble one day working for WHO in Des Moines, when the telegraph connection to a baseball game was lost. Reagan improvised by having the batter continue to foul off imaginary pitches until the telegraph connection finally was restored.<sup>4</sup> These improvisational skills would serve him well as a politician later in life as he deftly deflected not only fellow politicians' challenges, but also questions from often hostile journalists.

Reagan parlayed his radio career into a successful film career when he moved to Hollywood in 1937. Though he never broke into the top tier of actors within the studio system, Reagan turned out an impressive number of movies, mostly so-called "B movies," which lacked big budgets and major stars. In Hollywood, Reagan learned the importance of believing one's own lines—if the actor did not believe the lines that he was uttering, then the audience would not believe them either. He also learned that the camera could pick up insincerity and convey it quickly to an audience. Alongside the skills learned in radio broadcasting, Reagan's mastery in front of the camera would serve him well later in the world of politics.<sup>5</sup>

Reagan's first experience combining his acting and oratorical skills with executive decision making came during his term as President of the Screen Actor's Guild (SAG) from 1947 to 1952.<sup>6</sup> In this role, Reagan became embroiled in the business of

Hollywood, as well as in national politics, as Hollywood became the focus of post-war anti-communist investigations. In 1947, Reagan wound up testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In his testimony, Reagan cooperated with the investigation and acknowledged that there had been some suspected communists within the SAG. He ensured the committee that the vast majority of members in the SAG were loyal Americans who had successfully prevented any communist influence within the motion picture industry. Reagan argued that a democracy should preserve free speech; he also asserted that he did not want to see any legitimate political party outlawed on the basis of its ideology, providing that its leaders and members did not represent a foreign government.<sup>7</sup>

As Reagan's movie career waned, he began developing a new career as a corporate spokesman.<sup>8</sup> Hired by General Electric as a salesman, Reagan gained valuable experience with the new and rising medium of television. Reagan seemed a perfect fit for early live television, as it allowed him to combine his skill in front of a camera with his experience as an unscripted radio announcer. His job with General Electric also afforded him the opportunity to hone his public speaking skills, as he traveled around the country giving speeches to GE employees and other audiences at public events sponsored by GE.<sup>9</sup>

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, Reagan had begun advocating a more conservative political agenda, even though he remained a registered Democrat.<sup>10</sup> As noted by Kurt Ritter, Reagan's speeches during this era "laid the rhetorical groundwork which would eventually help to elect him president.... He showed that a conservative political speaker need not project a combative image."<sup>11</sup> It is important to emphasize that many of these conservative ideas—especially his advocacy of smaller government—were not as common at the time. Reagan was able to take conservative and anti-communist positions in the public sphere yet distance himself from right-wing zealots without losing their electoral support. Reagan said that he got along with the far right by persuading them to "accept my philosophy, not by my accepting theirs."<sup>12</sup>

In late October 1964, Reagan gave a nationally televised speech, "A Time for Choosing," in support of conservative standard bearer and Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater. This speech marked Reagan's entry into the national political scene. Unlike Goldwater who ran unsuccessfully for the presidency, many conservatives thought that Reagan could win on conservative principles.<sup>13</sup> David Broder and Stephen Hess commented that this speech marked "the most successful national political debut since William Jennings Bryan electrified the 1896 Democratic convention with his 'Cross of Gold' speech," making "Reagan a political star overnight."<sup>14</sup>

Two years later, Reagan was elected governor of California, beating the incumbent Democrat Pat Brown. When the Democrats attempted to portray Reagan as an inexperienced movie star with far less experience than Brown, Reagan replied, "That's why I'm running."<sup>15</sup> Establishing a precedent that he would follow in future political campaigns, Reagan stuck to his key principles and reiterated them with hopeful optimism.<sup>16</sup> As governor, he established an executive style that he would eventually transfer to the White House. Reagan believed that his job as executive was to establish the themes and general policies of his administration, not to manage all of the details.

After appointing highly qualified administrators, Reagan would leave them alone to enact his policies. As historian William E. Pemberton notes, "He regarded himself as the salesman and chief spokesman for the administration rather than as the manager of government operations."<sup>17</sup> Despite some criticism, Reagan remained focused on his key principles and succeeded in changing the status quo in Sacramento.<sup>18</sup>

Reagan stepped down as governor after two terms only to insert himself into presidential politics in 1976. In the wake of Watergate, the resignation of Richard Nixon, and the unexpected presidency of Gerald R. Ford, the Republican Party was in turmoil. Ford, now the Republican incumbent, enjoyed a brief burst of national support that evaporated rapidly following his pardon of Nixon. In addition, the Republican Party was far from solidified behind Ford, a long-time congressman with little executive experience and a reputation as a moderate. Many conservatives rallied around Ronald Reagan to challenge Ford for the Republican nomination.<sup>19</sup> Challenging an incumbent president from within one's own party is almost always a political long shot. Yet Reagan did remarkably well, despite a few missteps.<sup>20</sup> Though Ford won the Republican nomination, Reagan positioned himself to be the frontrunner for the 1980 Republican nomination.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Cold War: Active Containment to Détente*

By 1980, the Cold War had become an accepted fact for most of the world and its leaders. Almost since the end of World War II, the diplomatic and military standoff between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the United States dominated both international geopolitics and domestic politics. After years of fluctuating tension and proxy wars, diplomats attempted to "stabilize" the Cold War with the rise of detente in the late 1960s and 1970s. For Reagan and other like-minded anti-communists, however, the continued existence of the Soviet Union was untenable.

As pro-Soviet communist governments were installed by Stalin in Eastern Europe in the late 1940s (e.g., Poland, Bulgaria, Romania), pro-communist factions also struggled to take power in areas not directly under Soviet control, such as Italy, Greece, and Turkey. To many in the United States, communism appeared to be spreading like a virus amid the wrecked economies of Europe. Widening spy scandals in the United States and Europe in the late 1940s bolstered the growing anti-communist sentiment within domestic American politics. By the late 1940s, events such as the hardening of the Iron Curtain across Eastern Europe and the "loss" of China to communism intensified the growing fear that communism was spreading unchecked across the globe.

By the early 1950s, the American policy towards the communist threat had become one of active containment. The Truman Doctrine established the pattern America would follow. As civil wars in Turkey and Greece threatened to allow communists to gain power, the United States adopted a policy of opposing such communist threats wherever they appeared.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Truman refused to back down when Stalin attempted to close West Berlin to the United States and its allies. In response, he initiated what became known as the Berlin Airlift.<sup>23</sup> Building on the writings of George Kennan, America's cold war strategy was comprehensively defined in

National Security Council paper number 68. Formulated in 1950 during the Truman administration, this document asserted that the United States would contain communism where it already existed and aggressively check any further expansion of communist influence around the globe. NSC 68 extended the Truman Doctrine to include the entire non-communist world.<sup>24</sup>

As a result, the United States intervened with economic and military aid around the globe during the next forty years and a few times with direct military intervention. The United States chose to directly intervene after communist-led North Korea invaded South Korea. Although the Korean War dragged into a stalemate before a ceasefire was achieved, the United States had followed through on the strategic policies outlined in NSC 68. Similarly, the United States chose to oppose communist expansion in Vietnam. Unlike the dramatic communist invasion and American counter attack in Korea, the United States found itself slowly dragged into a less conventional war in Vietnam.

By the late 1960s, the United States' military intervention in Vietnam was viewed as a quagmire by an increasingly impatient American public. A policy of détente began to take hold during the 1970s. Proponents of détente emphasized the need to create relationships among the superpowers and to stabilize the Cold War in order to prevent nuclear war.<sup>25</sup> To anti-communists like Reagan, détente as practiced in the 1970s was merely a means to prop up a faltering Soviet Union. In a radio address in 1978, Reagan gave his opinion of détente: "[I]sn't that what a farmer has with his turkey—until thanksgiving day."<sup>26</sup> In 1977 he quipped, "I don't know about you but I [don't] exactly tear my hair and go into a panic at the possibility of losing détente."<sup>27</sup>

### *"The Era of Self Doubt is Over": The Presidency and Ronald Reagan*

In 1980, Reagan faced an incumbent Jimmy Carter who was labeled by many as a failed leader on the domestic front and in foreign policy. As Pemberton explains, "Reagan made Carter's leadership the issue. . . . in 1976, he had used a misery index of 15.3 (the sum of inflation and unemployment rates) to defeat Ford, but by the end of 1979 it had reached 19.3. Reagan turned the misery index into part of his scathing indictment of Carter's record."<sup>28</sup> With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the hostage crisis in Tehran in 1979, Carter's foreign policy leadership was also beginning to look suspect despite his emphasis on achieving peace between Egypt and Israel during his administration.<sup>29</sup>

On the domestic front, Reagan employed rhetoric similar to that used during his gubernatorial campaigns in the 1960s. Reagan's rhetoric on economic and law-and-order issues swayed many traditional Democratic voters to support Reagan.<sup>30</sup> Reagan accomplished this feat through persuasive rhetoric emphasizing the strengthening of America's military, cutting taxes, and balancing the budget without providing specific details or explicitly attacking the welfare system. Although refusing to debate Reagan earlier in the campaign, Carter finally agreed to a debate believing, like others who had campaigned against Reagan in the past, that his mastery of details and issues would undermine Reagan.<sup>31</sup> In the October 28, 1980, televised debate between Reagan and Carter, "[t]he line that most people remembered came when Carter attacked Reagan for

wanting to change the Social Security system. With a wry smile and a shrug, Reagan said, 'There you go again.' With that gentle ridicule, and the audience laughter, he diminished the president [Carter]."<sup>32</sup> Reagan handily won the debate against yet another political opponent who had underestimated him. As historian Gil Troy notes, "Reagan made a [political] career of being underestimated—thanks to the arrogance of Democrats and reporters."<sup>33</sup> Reagan's closing statement highlighted many of Carter's failings:

Next Tuesday all of you will go to the polls, will stand there in the polling place and make a decision. I think when you make that decision, it might be well if you would ask yourself, are you better off than you were four years ago? Is it easier for you to go and buy things in the stores than it was four years ago? Is there more or less unemployment in the country than there was four years ago? Is America as respected throughout the world as it was? Do you feel that our security is as safe, that we're as strong as we were four years ago?<sup>34</sup>

Reagan's vision to restore America's sagging fortunes appealed to the American electorate who swept him into office with an overwhelming majority of votes. Reagan's inaugural address appealed to such sentiments by focusing primarily on domestic issues. Reagan wanted to solve these domestic issues not through greater government spending but by unleashing the initiative of private Americans.<sup>35</sup> "In this present crisis," said Reagan, "government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem... Now, so there will be no misunderstanding, it's not my intention to do away with government. It is rather to make it work—work with us, not over us; to stand by our side, not ride on our back. Government can and must provide opportunity, not smother it; foster productivity, not stifle it."<sup>36</sup> He sought to restore Americans' confidence by boosting their pride and patriotism in the last half of the speech which touched upon foreign policy indirectly. Nevertheless, as Reagan showed in speeches over the next several years of his presidency, he believed that a strong, confident America was necessarily tied to foreign policy and a successful defense against communism and the Soviet Union.

As historian Michael Schaller notes, Reagan "tapped a popular yearning to restore a sense of community, real or imagined, lost over the previous two decades."<sup>37</sup> In many ways, Reagan rightly saw this as his first mission before moving on to more specific challenges, both foreign and domestic. Even events beyond Reagan's control seemed to contribute to this boost in national confidence. The Iranians waited to release the remaining American hostages until Reagan had taken the oath of office. The hostage crisis that had become a symbol of American weakness under the Carter presidency ended as Reagan took office.

The position taken in the "Evil Empire" speech built upon Reagan's earlier statements as president. In his press conference on January 29, 1981, the following exchange between Reagan and ABC reporter Sam Donaldson highlighted Reagan's opposition to détente:

Q. Mr. President, what do you see as the long-range intentions of the Soviet Union? Do you think, for instance, the Kremlin is bent on world domination that might lead to a continuation of the cold war, or do you think that under other circumstances detente is possible?

The President. Well, so far detente's been a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to pursue its own aims. . . . I know of no leader of the Soviet Union since the revolution, and including the present leadership, that has not more than once repeated in the various Communist congresses they hold their determination that their goal must be the promotion of world revolution and a one-world Socialist or Communist state, whichever word you want to use. Now, as long as they do that and as long as they, at the same time, have openly and publicly declared that the only morality they recognize is what will further their cause, meaning they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat, in order to attain that, ... we operate on a different set of standards, I think when you do business with them, even at a detente, you keep that in mind.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, Reagan's fear of a nuclear holocaust was well established prior to his presidency. In 1976, Reagan said, "[W]e live in a world in which the great powers have aimed . . . at each other horrible missiles of destruction . . . that can in minutes virtually destroy the civilized world we live in."<sup>39</sup> As historian John Lewis Gaddis notes, in Reagan's opinion, détente was sustaining not only the Soviet Union but also the nuclear arms race.<sup>40</sup>

Over the next several years, Reagan challenged the notion of détente, predicted the eventual downfall of the Soviet Union, and boosted American confidence and patriotism while placing all this in the context of religious imagery with America as a divinely inspired "city on the hill."<sup>41</sup> Much of the message found in the "Evil Empire" speech was the culmination of years of refining such rhetoric and arguments.<sup>42</sup>

On May 17, 1981, Reagan gave the commencement address at Notre Dame University. Speaking at the most famous center of Catholic higher education in the United States, Reagan used a reference to Pope John Paul II's critiques of communism in order to better relate to his audience:

The years ahead are great ones for this country, for the cause of freedom and the spread of civilization. The West won't contain communism, it will transcend communism. It won't bother to dismiss or denounce it, it will dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written. . . . It was Pope John Paul II who warned in last year's encyclical on mercy and justice against certain economic theories that use the rhetoric of class struggle to justify injustice. He said, "In the name of an alleged justice the neighbor is sometimes destroyed, killed, deprived of liberty or stripped of fundamental human rights." For the West, for America, the time has come to dare to show to the world that our civilized ideas, our traditions, our values, are not—like the ideology and war machine of totalitarian societies—just a facade of strength. It is

time for the world to know our intellectual and spiritual values are rooted in the source of all strength, a belief in a Supreme Being, and a law higher than our own.<sup>43</sup>

A few weeks later, Reagan built upon this rhetoric in his graduation speech at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York. In this speech, Reagan outlined his plans to create a stronger, better funded military to confront the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Reagan once again used a quote from a pope to endorse his vision of a militarily strong United States as part of a divine plan. Reagan masterfully meshed patriotism, divine sanction, and the mission of America into a rationale for defeating the "evil force" of communism and the Soviet Union:

There have been four wars in my lifetime. None of them came about because the United States was too strong. At the end of World War II we alone were at the peak of our military strength. . . . it was then that in those dark days that Pope Pius XII said, "America has a great genius for great and unselfish deeds. Into the hands of America God has placed an afflicted mankind." I'm happy to tell you that the people of America have recovered from what can only be called a temporary aberration. There is a spiritual revival going on in this country, a hunger on the part of the people to once again be proud of America—all that it is and all that it can be...The era of self-doubt is over. We've stopped looking at our warts and rediscovered how much there is to love in this blessed land. . . . At Trophy Point I'm told there are links of a great chain that was forged and stretched across the Hudson to prevent the British fleet from penetrating further into the valley. Today you are that chain holding back an evil force that would extinguish the light we've been tending for 6,000 years.<sup>44</sup>

A year later in Britain, Reagan spoke to the British Parliament in Westminster. In this speech, Reagan clearly recognized the danger and horror of nuclear weapons as a threat that could destroy all of mankind. He pointed out that the START negotiations were "critical to mankind. Our commitment to early success in these negotiations is firm and unshakable, and our purpose is clear: reducing the risk of war by reducing the means of waging war on both sides."<sup>45</sup> Reagan made it clear, though, that the willingness to negotiate in order to reduce the danger of nuclear war does not mean that opposition to the Soviet Union should cease. He was highly critical of the Soviets, stating that "the regimes planted by totalitarianism have had more than 30 years to establish their legitimacy. But none—not one regime—has yet been able to risk free elections. Regimes planted by bayonets do not take root."<sup>46</sup> Over and over, Reagan reiterated his belief that the days of the Soviet Union were numbered, primarily because the people living under these regimes would one day rise up. Reagan concluded that "the march of freedom and democracy . . . will leave Marxism-Leninism on the ash-heap of history."<sup>47</sup>

Prime Minister Thatcher hailed the speech as a "triumph."<sup>48</sup> As noted by Richard Reeves, few American commentators saw much significance in the speech with the



exception of NBC's Marvin Kalb who said, "The President is in effect saying, after sixty years in power, the Soviet leadership still has no political legitimacy and he wants to take on the entire communist world. . . . the President believes, and it is vintage Reagan, that the communist system is dying."<sup>49</sup> Although the American press viewed this speech as primarily wishful thinking with little in the way of concrete proposals, this strident anti-communist speech received only a fraction of the attention that Reagan's "Evil Empire" address to the National Association of Evangelicals would receive the following year.<sup>50</sup>

### *The "Evil Empire" Speech: Religion and "Reds"*

The address to the National Association of Evangelicals was not one that was highly anticipated by the press, particularly as a major foreign policy speech. Instead, this speech to the National Association of Evangelicals was intended to shore up conservative support.<sup>51</sup> The previous August, Cal Thomas, vice president of the Moral Majority (a conservative evangelical organization) said, "There's no question that President Reagan has not put personal pressure on the prayer amendment and the antiabortion issue."<sup>52</sup> The previous year, the National Association of Evangelicals had endorsed a proposed constitutional amendment allowing prayer in the public schools.<sup>53</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the vast majority of Reagan's speech to this group was devoted to his opposition to abortion, proposals to require parental notification for teens seeking abortion, and his views on religious issues.<sup>54</sup> Especially since the late 1960s and early 1970s, evangelical Christians had become increasingly an important segment of the Republican Party's base. The 1960s cultural upheavals and Supreme Court decisions on prayer in the public schools and abortion had mobilized evangelical Christians to act together in the public square.

The foreign policy emphasis of the speech, however, was probably inspired by the nuclear freeze movement and its growing support among American religious groups.<sup>55</sup> In November of 1982, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a pastoral letter that some interpreted as an endorsement of the proposed freeze on nuclear weapons.<sup>56</sup> While Reagan claimed that he too wanted to end the threat of nuclear war, he argued that the proposed freeze would leave the United States at a nuclear disadvantage and that, in any case, it would be impossible to verify Soviet compliance.<sup>57</sup> At one point, Reagan even suggested that the nuclear freeze movement was being manipulated by the Soviet Union.<sup>58</sup> In early February, 1983, more than 600 delegates to a freeze convention at St. Louis University agreed to push Congress for a unilateral freeze on testing nuclear weapons, and at the same meeting the freeze activists pledged to make the freeze a major issue in the 1984 elections.<sup>59</sup> Thus, another of Reagan's motives in delivering the speech may have been to steal the spotlight from the freeze campaign and to undermine its efforts to influence the 1984 elections.<sup>60</sup>

Anthony Dolan, chief White House speechwriter, wrote the initial draft of the "Evil Empire" speech. He had also written the initial drafts of the Westminster speech that attacked the Soviet Union. As a former press secretary for famed conservative William F. Buckley's 1970 senatorial campaign and a friend of William Casey, current CIA

director and a long-time confidant of Reagan, Dolan intimately understood Reagan's position on the Soviet Union and communism.<sup>61</sup> Dolan was considered by some in the White House to be a "wild man who was far to the right of Reagan."<sup>62</sup> Yet Reagan's anti-communist beliefs, influenced by the writings of Whittaker Chambers, were well-established by this time.<sup>63</sup> While Reagan had chosen to remove Whittaker Chambers' tough language about the "evils" of communism from his Westminster speech, the president decided to incorporate such language into the speech for the National Association of Evangelicals.<sup>64</sup>

This speech, however, was not just the product of a like-minded speechwriter whose words were merely echoed by the one-time actor. As noted by political scientist John Pitney, it is instructive to turn to the drafts of the speech available in the archives of the Reagan Presidential Library.<sup>65</sup> Prevailing views during the 1980s portrayed Reagan as an out-of-touch executive who ate jelly beans and took numerous naps. As the records of the Reagan Library become available, however, scholars are increasingly discovering that Reagan had a far greater hand in the development and construction of his speeches and in choosing the ideas within them than previously thought. The typescript of the speech initially prepared by Dolan and sent to Reagan at noon on March 5 is full of Reagan's corrections and additions.<sup>66</sup> Nearly the entire draft is marked with substantial changes in Reagan's own handwriting. Reagan added entire pages of handwritten additions on the back of the sheets of this first draft. At the beginning of the speech, Reagan substantially changed the anecdotes and the joke to suit his own tastes and delivery preferences (4-8).<sup>67</sup> Near the end of the speech, Reagan added a lengthy anecdote about communism (43-45). At other times, Reagan cut out sections with statistics and citations of studies and substituted a summary in his own words.<sup>68</sup> In other areas, entire paragraphs and pages were added by Reagan and incorporated largely as he had written them into the final draft. For example, much of the section dealing with parental notification was added by Reagan (13-18). In order to address the abortion issue more fully, he cut out large chunks of the originally proposed section dealing with the issue of prayer in the public school—putting boxes around entire paragraphs with a large "X" through the middle. Similarly, Reagan cut multiple paragraphs regarding the growing war on drugs as an example of a "dark legacy" in the American past (originally located between what became paragraphs 34 and 35). As noted by Colleen Shogan, in his speeches at least, Reagan tended to avoid "presenting his programs in partisan terms and instead concentrated on disagreements among competing values or principles."<sup>69</sup>

David Gergen, appointed as Assistant to the President for Communications, reviewed all presidential speeches and did not agree with this speech's strident tone.<sup>70</sup> Gergen later told Lou Cannon that he was "disturbed by 'outrageous statements' in the draft of the Orlando speech and worked with McFarlane [appointed as a State Department Counselor] to tone it down."<sup>71</sup> In the end, however, Reagan (and Dolan's) tougher language largely prevailed when "the cautious types retreated, figuring it was just some good old 'Onward Christian Soldiers' stuff for a bunch of ministers."<sup>72</sup>

On the morning of March 8, Reagan flew to Orlando to deliver the speech. Outside the Sheraton Towers where the conference was being held, protestors—some

wearing Reagan masks—held signs endorsing a nuclear freeze, while other protesters called for an end to Reagan's presidency.<sup>73</sup> Inside, Reagan's reception at just after three o'clock in the afternoon was quite different, as he was warmly welcomed by the approximately 1,200 evangelicals.<sup>74</sup>

As originally planned, the first two-thirds of the speech focused upon the key social issues vitally important to the NAE: abortion and the proposed prayer amendment. Reagan warmed up the crowd telling them how much he appreciated their prayers for him and how he believed in intercessory prayer (4). Reagan then elicited laughter by quipping that he had told someone just days ago that if they got a busy signal when praying, "it was just me in there ahead of him" (4). Reagan proceeded to highlight his accomplishment in requiring all clinics that receive government funding to notify the parents of children receiving contraceptives (15-17). He then briefly discussed a proposed amendment regarding prayer in the public school before stating his opposition to abortion (22-24).

Reagan used each of these issues as examples emphasizing the importance of Judeo-Christian values, a limited government, and the principles of the Founding Fathers in the civic life of America. Throughout these sections, he cast opponents of the Judeo-Christian worldview as proponents of a "modern-day secularism" that discarded "the tried and time-tested values upon which our very civilization is based." No matter how well intentioned, he argued, their value system was "radically different from that of most Americans." And while they claimed to be "freeing us from superstitions of the past," they had taken upon themselves the job of "superintending" the rest of us through "government rule and regulation." Sometimes their voices were "louder than ours," Reagan told the evangelicals, "but they are not yet a majority" (13).

Reagan's choice of language in referring to his secular opponents was significant. In referring to his political opponents as people who believed "they're freeing us from superstitions of the past," he used language very similar to the language he used in the speech to describe the Soviet communists. Like his domestic opponents, they were people who repudiated "all morality that proceeds from supernatural ideas—that's their name for religion" (36). In this manner, Reagan (along with his speechwriter Dolan) subtly linked domestic opposition to his agenda to the nation's atheistic foreign enemies.

Reagan also emphasized the theme of spiritual renewal in America, calling for a restoration of a Christian America. "Is all of Judeo-Christian tradition wrong?" Reagan asked when discussing teenage sex (18). He continued by calling the debate over parental notification "only one example of many attempts to water down traditional values and even abrogate the original terms of American democracy." According to Reagan, freedom prospered "when religion is vibrant and the rule of law under God is acknowledged" (20). Reagan then argued that American government and the Judeo-Christian values were inextricably tied together. He cited the Declaration of Independence, "In God We Trust" on American currency, and official prayers held in both Congress and the Supreme Court as manifestations of America's Christian traditions (21). A few paragraphs later, Reagan built on this by citing opinion polls

showing that the overwhelming majority of Americans believed in God and the relevance of the Ten Commandments in everyday life (30).

In the next section of the speech, Reagan lamented the role of sin and evil in the world and in American history in particular (32-35). Merging the Christian theology of original sin with conservative wariness towards government, Reagan emphasized that man will always be sinful and that "no government schemes are going to perfect man" (32). Despite linking America and its government to biblical values and traditions, Reagan warned that, "[t]here is sin and evil in the world, and we're enjoined by Scripture and the Lord Jesus to oppose it with all our might." Recalling America's history of slavery, Reagan noted that "[o]ur nation, too, has a legacy of evil with which it must deal," but then suggested that America had somehow risen above that past sin: "The glory of this land has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past" (33). Calling upon the evangelicals to denounce the lingering evil of racism in the United States (33), he then segued into the foreign policy section, while refusing to leave the audience with a negative view of American history. "[W]hatever sad episodes exist in our past," said Reagan in language similar to that used in his earlier speeches at Notre Dame and West Point, "any objective observer must hold a positive view of American history. . . . Especially in this century, America has kept alight the torch of freedom, but not just for ourselves but for millions of others around the world" (35).

Thus, Reagan masterfully laid the groundwork for linking the domestic and foreign policy sections of this speech together through the invocation of Judeo-Christian values. Beginning his discussion of the Soviet Union, he then recalled his first press conference, where he expressed skepticism about détente and reflected on the immorality of communism (36). Recalling some of the criticism that he received for those statements, Reagan noted that he was only citing Lenin. To Leninist-Marxists in the USSR, Reagan argued, "[m]orality is entirely subordinate to the interests of class war. Everything is moral that is necessary for the annihilation of the old exploiting social order and for uniting the proletariat" (36). Invoking the legacy of appeasement to Nazism in the 1930s, Reagan observed that those who ignore the immorality and danger of the Soviet Union reflected "an historical reluctance to see totalitarian powers for what they are" (36).

Reagan, in his own hand, added the next section to the speech during the drafting process. "This doesn't mean we should isolate ourselves and refuse to seek an understanding with them," said Reagan, seemingly tempering his previous statement. "I intend to do everything I can to persuade them of our peaceful intent," he explained (38). In lines he penned himself, however, Reagan then made clear his resolve to stand up to the Soviets, drawing perhaps the longest and loudest applause of the speech. "We will never compromise our principles and standards," said Reagan, building to a verbal crescendo as he spoke. "We will never give away our freedom. We will never abandon our belief in God" (38).

Building on that theme, Reagan then blasted the nuclear freeze movement in a policy section not included in the hand-corrected typescript of March 5. In the "President's Backup Copy" printed out that day, the next few paragraphs (39-42) were added with a note "(INSERT on cards)" written on this back-up copy.<sup>75</sup> That morning, a

House Committee had approved a resolution endorsing the basic concept of a nuclear freeze.<sup>76</sup> Rather than the more indirect criticism of the freeze in the March 5 draft, Reagan now added a more direct criticism, calling it a "dangerous fraud" that would provide "merely the illusion of peace." The "reality," he added, "is that we must find peace through strength" (40). Arguing that a freeze would actually hurt chances for a real reduction in nuclear weapons, he also argued that it would be impossible to verify and would reward the Soviet Union for their recent efforts to build up their nuclear arsenal. An "honest freeze," he concluded, would require "verification and compliance" (42).

Following this brief discussion of current events, Reagan then reverted to a more ideological and religious tone, which characterized a lot of the speech. To applause, he told an anecdote about a father who preferred to have his "little girl die now; still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God" (43). He called upon the audience to pray "for the salvation of all of those who live in that totalitarian darkness. Pray they will discover the joy of knowing God." But until they did, he insisted, the Soviet Union would remain "the focus of evil in the modern world" (45).

Reagan then returned to the language of the first part of the speech, speaking out against secularists and the notion of "moral equivalency." Quoting noted Christian author C. S. Lewis, Reagan reiterated the need for members of the audience to challenge the moral relativism so prevalent in the current debate over nuclear weapons. It is in this context that he referred to the Soviet Union as the "evil empire"—a phrase that became synonymous with the entire speech. Denouncing those who found "both sides equally at fault," he claimed that his political opponents ignored "the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire" in their efforts to portray the arms race as "a giant misunderstanding" rather than a "struggle between right and wrong and good and evil" (48). He then made a final plea to reject the simplistic policy of a nuclear freeze and support his efforts to negotiate "verifiable reductions in the world's nuclear arsenals and one day, with God's help, their total elimination" (49).

Despite his emphasis on the importance of a strong American military, Reagan began wrapping up the speech by tying it back into his larger themes. Arguing that "the struggle now going on for the world will never be decided by bombs or rockets, by armies or military might," he declared that the "real crisis we face today is a spiritual one; at root, it is a test of moral will and faith" (50). Reagan then invoked Whittaker Chambers and chapters in Isaiah from the Bible to support this claim. It was this very claim—that the Cold War was a spiritual rather than a diplomatic or political problem—that gave such potency to Reagan's use of the term "evil empire." Especially to advocates of détente and those with a less religious view of the world, Reagan's depiction of the Cold War as a battle between good and evil, between a nation based upon Judeo-Christian principles and an "evil empire," was shocking.

While one might think that the speech should have ended there, Reagan actually concluded with a quote from Thomas Paine, claiming that humans have the power to make the world over again (54). This was an interesting choice for a speech to conservative Christians because Paine, the author of *Common Sense*, was a Deist who

denied the redemptive power of Jesus Christ as an invention of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>77</sup> Following on the heels of a scriptural quotation, the words of Paine may have seemed out of place. To Reagan, however, Paine's words fit with his religious upbringing in the Disciples of Christ, a denomination stemming from the Second Great Awakening, with that movement's focus on free will and reforming the earth. As Pemberton notes, Reagan believed "that God had chosen the American people to fulfill a special mission on earth. The vision of the City on the Hill became the foundation of Ronald Reagan's political philosophy. . . ."<sup>78</sup> In any case, the audience apparently sensed no inconsistencies at the end of Reagan's speech, no abandonment of his Christian principles. Indeed, the loud applause soon melted into the playing of the hymn, "Onward Christian Soldiers."<sup>79</sup>

### *Reagan's "Preferred Weapon": Reactions and Legacy*

The immediate newspaper responses the next day emphasized the key points of his speech, but it was a few days before the pundits and editorial writers reacted. Columnists attacked Reagan's discussion of Cold War diplomacy within a moral framework—particularly his use of Christian rhetoric and principles. By using religious rhetoric, these writers argued, Reagan would turn the Cold War into a "holy war." One of the most prominent historians to speak out was Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in a *Wall Street Journal* editorial entitled, "Pretension in the Presidential Pulpit." By placing the United States in the camp of Jesus Christ, Schlesinger argued, Reagan made compromise and negotiation with the Soviet Union impossible.<sup>80</sup> In the *New York Times*, columnist Anthony Lewis reacted similarly: "If there is anything that should be illegitimate in the American system, it is sectarian religiosity to sell a political program."<sup>81</sup> Another well-known historian, Henry Steele Commager, remarked, "It was the worst speech in American history, and I've read them all. No other presidential speech has ever so flagrantly allied the government with religion. It was a gross appeal to religious prejudice."<sup>82</sup>

Especially to advocates of détente, Reagan's rhetoric seemed destabilizing and particularly dangerous in an era of nuclear weapons and Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Some columnists took a more pragmatic approach, criticizing Reagan's moral and religious rhetoric as a diplomatic error. In the *Los Angeles Times*, columnist Ernest Conine argued that Reagan's rhetoric was a mistake, "[n]ot because what he said was really untrue, but because saying it is very likely to do more harm than good."<sup>83</sup> Most policy analysts actually agreed with Reagan that a nuclear freeze might hurt the possibility of real nuclear disarmament, said Conine.<sup>84</sup> If Reagan would have only used pragmatic, rational arguments to make his case, Conine insisted, the United States would have been far better off.<sup>85</sup> In the *Christian Science Monitor*, David Newsom, a former U.S. undersecretary of state for political affairs, argued that "[m]oral absolutes complicate diplomacy."<sup>86</sup> Newsom bemoaned Reagan's return to the earlier Cold War rhetoric of American statesmen like John Foster Dulles, who likewise had called communist nations "immoral."<sup>87</sup> When Reagan and other Americans added the "moral

factor" to foreign policy and saw "international relations in absolute terms," Newsom argued, diplomacy became less likely to succeed.<sup>88</sup>

Reagan's use of Christian rhetoric and his vision of a Christian America led many in the press to either ignore or discount some of his own statements that qualified his rhetoric. Reagan clearly stated that his moral stance did not preclude meeting and "seeking an understanding" with the Soviet Union to bring about peace (38). In both this speech and his previous speeches, Reagan clearly expressed his desire for a reduction in nuclear weapons. He believed, however, that only negotiating from a position of strength could force the Soviets to make real concessions. For example, criticizing Reagan's application of "original sin," Schlesinger argued that Reagan seemed not to realize that this doctrine impacted all cultures and all of humanity—including the United States.<sup>89</sup> Yet Schlesinger overlooked Reagan's comments about America's own "legacy of evil" and his statement that "[t]he glory of this land has been its capacity for transcending the moral evils of our past" (33).

Reagan himself later commented on this common complaint in a follow-up interview about the speech. Reagan expressed concern about how the press was taking his speech out of context. Reagan insisted that his speech rejected the "inevitability of war." To a reporter from the London *Sunday Times*, Reagan reportedly said that "under the guise of . . . détente' efforts were made to 'sweep the differences [between the superpowers] under the rug.'" He continued his note of explanation by arguing that he "stated, very frankly what I believe the differences are" during the Orlando speech, simultaneously expressing his "determination and . . . belief that peace is achievable."<sup>90</sup>

The delegates to the National Association of Evangelicals conference left without making an official statement or resolution on the question of a nuclear freeze. Nevertheless, conservative evangelicals, especially those filling the pews in evangelical churches, increasingly found a political home within the Republican Party, which is noteworthy because many had been critical of the president and the Republican Party less than a year earlier. As the press mentioned quite a few times, however, not all evangelicals agreed with Reagan's opposition to a nuclear freeze. Dr. Ronald Sider of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary called the idea of "some special divine connection between God and the United States" heretical.<sup>91</sup> Sider, leader of a group called Evangelicals for Social Action, insisted that "support for nuclear disarmament was growing among evangelicals."<sup>92</sup> Leaders of "mainline" Protestant churches—Presbyterian, Methodist, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ, etc.—apparently felt ignored by Reagan, whom they viewed as only interested in the "religious far right."<sup>93</sup>

Reagan followed up his "Evil Empire" speech with a speech two weeks later that became known as the "Star Wars" speech. In this nationally televised broadcast on March 23, 1983, Reagan proposed building a missile defense shield in space that could help thwart a nuclear attack. This Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) was a bargaining chip Reagan refused to give up in future summit meetings with the Soviet Union.<sup>94</sup> To Reagan, SDI promised to make nuclear weapons irrelevant and the world much safer. To proponents of détente, however, this created dangerous instability precisely because it undermined the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD)—the basis of

deterrence throughout most of the Cold War.<sup>95</sup> John Gaddis notes that no one in the American government had proposed such a system before because any such "attempt to build defenses against offensive weapons . . . could upset the delicate equilibrium upon which deterrence was supposed to depend." As Gaddis explained:

That made sense if one thought in static terms. . . . [But Reagan] saw that the Soviet Union had lost its ideological appeal, that it was losing whatever economic strength it once had, and that its survival as a superpower could no longer be taken for granted. That made stability, in his view, an outmoded, even immortal, priority. . . . If the U.S.S.R. was crumbling . . . [w]hy not hasten the disintegration. . . . [SDI] exploited the Soviet Union's backwardness in computer technology . . . it undercut the peace movement by framing the entire project in terms of lowering the risk of nuclear war: the ultimate purpose of SDI, Reagan insisted, was not to freeze nuclear weapons but rather to render them "impotent and obsolete."<sup>96</sup>

Despite all the criticism from antiwar activists following the Orlando speech, Reagan's expressed desire not just to freeze but to eliminate nuclear weapons or to render them obsolete signaled a bold new approach to strategic policy.<sup>97</sup>

Reagan's radical new approach also startled the Soviets. Almost immediately after the Orlando speech, the Soviet news agency Tass called Reagan's speech "provocative" and said it demonstrated that his administration "can only think in terms of confrontation and bellicose, lunatic anticommunism."<sup>98</sup> The Soviet statement continued to ridicule Reagan by noting the rise in antiwar movements in the West and concluding that the freeze movement had caused "profound concern" within his administration.<sup>99</sup> Such talk from the Soviets lent support to those in the United States criticizing Reagan's speech as dangerous and destabilizing. Yet there is also some evidence that the Soviets were shaken and felt threatened by Reagan's approach.<sup>100</sup> Even within the "evil empire," some began to question whether or not "the motherland was indeed evil."<sup>101</sup>

Negotiating from a position of strength, Reagan initiated high level contacts with the Soviets in early 1984. The old guard in the Kremlin dying combined with the rise of the relatively young Mikhail Gorbachev to provide a Soviet leader with which Reagan could negotiate the end of the Cold War. With these changes, rhetoric about actually reducing nuclear stockpiles did not seem too far-fetched. And in December of 1987, Reagan and Gorbachev did just that, signing an agreement on short- and intermediate-range nuclear missiles that actually eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons. Ratified by the U.S. Senate in 1988, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) resulted in the destruction of more than 2,600 of these weapons. Based on Reagan's "Trust but Verify" phrasing, this treaty allowed each side to provide on-site inspectors to oversee compliance with the treaty. To the amazement of his critics, Reagan, the hard-line anti-communist, had succeeded in reducing nuclear weapons—a feat that escaped his most recent predecessors the previous decade.<sup>102</sup>



Scholarly assessments of Reagan and the vision embodied in his "Evil Empire" speech have evolved over the past quarter century. As in the media, many of the initial scholarly responses to Reagan's rhetoric were negative. The passions of the time made detached analysis impossible, and many of these early works reflected the political and policy biases of the authors.<sup>103</sup> The first drafts of journalistic and academic histories at the end of the Reagan presidency perpetuated many of the stereotypes of Reagan as an amiable man with little intellectual capabilities who advocated wrongheaded policies with dangerous, simplistic rhetoric.<sup>104</sup> With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increasing availability of archival material in both the United States and in Russia, a more nuanced and comparatively positive appraisal of Reagan's presidency began to emerge in academia. By the time Ronald Reagan died in 2004, even some historians who once denounced him began ranking him among the "great" or "near great" presidents.<sup>105</sup>

Even early critics of the Orlando speech, such as G. Thomas Goodnight, have conceded the tremendous impact of Reagan's rhetoric in redirecting how Americans viewed the Cold War.<sup>106</sup> By 1988, political scientists like Phil Williams had begun to argue that Reagan's positive, patriotic rhetoric helped restore American pride in ways that established "a much more solid basis from which to deal with the Soviet Union."<sup>107</sup> Eric Nordlinger concurred that Reagan's tough talk about the Soviet Union laid the groundwork for future diplomacy because, "[o]nly a subjectively secure America would be prepared to accept a superpower reconciliation."<sup>108</sup> And as Bruce Russett noted in a longitudinal study of polling data, Reagan's rhetoric about the need to strengthen America's nuclear strength also convinced Americans that the United States was behind the Soviet Union in nuclear strength. As a result, they became less receptive to calls for arms control measures like the proposed freeze on nuclear weapons.<sup>109</sup>

By the early to mid 1990s, scholars had begun crediting Reagan's rhetoric with more than a psychological boost. Andrew Busch, in an article giving Reagan credit for the American victory in the Cold War, partially credited Reagan's "ideological counteroffensive" as manifested in speeches like the "Evil Empire" address.<sup>110</sup> Other scholars, particularly in the field of rhetoric, began reassessing Reagan's rhetoric as more complex and sophisticated than previously thought.<sup>111</sup>

Perhaps the most prominent historian involved in the rehabilitation of Ronald Reagan and his foreign policy rhetoric has been John Lewis Gaddis. Gaddis argues that Reagan "believed in the power of words, in the potency of ideas," and that he used "drama to shatter the constraints of conventional wisdom." Reagan, he continues, saw the Cold War itself as merely a "convention," with too many people simply "resigned . . . to its perpetuation." He thus sought to "break the stalemate—which was, he believed, largely psychological—by exploiting Soviet weakness and asserting western strengths." And his "preferred weapon," as Gaddis concludes, "was public oratory."<sup>112</sup>

The legacy of the "Evil Empire" speech continues into the twenty-first century. Some, at least, view President George W. Bush's reference to an "axis of evil" as modeled on Reagan's "evil empire" speech. According to Joshua Gunn, for example, Bush's first State of the Union address after September 11, 2001, in which he invoked the phrase "axis of evil" to describe Iraq, Iran, and North Korea,<sup>113</sup> represented a

"Reaganesque purging of an exogenous evil, right down to the justification of global action, suggesting that speechwriters may have revisited Reagan's famous remarks."<sup>114</sup> Although he did not explicitly invoke Christian doctrine, as Reagan had at Orlando, Bush (along with his speech writer David Frum), not only called these states evil, but also stated that "evil is real, and it must be opposed."<sup>115</sup> Not surprisingly, many commentators had the same reaction to Bush's reference to "evil" as they did to Reagan's "evil empire" speech, objecting to the very idea of talking about foreign policy in such moralistic terms.<sup>116</sup>

The appropriateness of religious references in presidential discourse remains a vital question nearly a quarter of a century after the Orlando speech. Christianity and religious rhetoric have always played some role in presidential speech, but Reagan's Orlando speech opened the door to more explicitly moralistic political rhetoric—in both the Democratic and Republican parties. In an increasingly secular Western world, some view religion as a private matter and one that should not play a role in politics or decision-making. Reagan's rhetoric, particularly in the Orlando speech, challenged that trend, changing both the tone of presidential rhetoric and the dynamics of diplomacy and politics. Though widely derided at the time, the "Evil Empire" speech shows how the moralistic rhetoric of Ronald Reagan left a legacy far greater and more broad ranging than observers imagined at the time.

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101 Andrew E. Busch, "Ronald Reagan and the Defeat of the Soviet Empire," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 27 (1997): 455.

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111 For a brief overview of such studies see the first few pages in John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, "A Covenant-affirming Jeremiad: The Post-presidential Ideological Appeals of Ronald Wilson Reagan," *Communication Studies* 56 (2005): 157-159. See also John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, "Reagan at Moscow State University: Consubstantiality Underlying Conflict," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 10 (2007): 77-106; John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland, "Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate: Moral Clarity Tempered by Pragmatism," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9 (2006): 21-50; and B. Wayne Howell, "Ronald Reagan's Address At Moscow State University: A Rhetoric of Conciliation and Subversion," *Southern Communication Journal*, 68 (2003): 107-120.

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113 George W. Bush, "The President's State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>. (Accessed on October 15, 2007)

114 Joshua Gunn, "The Rhetoric of Exorcism: George W. Bush and the Return of Political Demonology," *Western Journal of Communication* 68 (2004): 11.

115 Bush, "The President's State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>. (Accessed on October 15, 2007)

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116 Robert Hariman, "Speaking of Evil," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 511. This article is part of a larger forum devoted to the use of "evil" in public discourse. See the same volume listed above on pages 509-566.