

Lessons from Batman: Can we live with justice, peace and truth?

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [September 23, 2008](#) issue

The summer's big popcorn bash of a movie was *The Dark Knight*, a thrill ride as unrelenting as a roller coaster without brakes. But the film is more than that.

First of all, it showed some excellent filmcraft. Consider the opening scene, in which the camera tracks in with increasing velocity on the black glass of a skyscraper. In a post-9/11 world, I couldn't help thinking I was watching from the perspective of an airplane about to slam into the building. At the last second the film switches to another camera *inside* the building, and the window glass bursts outward rather than inward. It's a neat surprise, a wonderfully executed reversal of perspective, all the more stunning because our breath is taken away by just a gunshot rather than a horrible crash and fireball. (I am of two minds about exploiting the 9/11 tragedy for aesthetic effect, but that's another topic.)

Alternately comic and bone-chilling—and sometimes both at once—Heath Ledger as the Joker delivers the performance of a lifetime. His work adds an extra level of suspense: we not only stay alert to the story but giddily wait for Ledger's next appearance.

Ledger's performance is grounded not only in his technique and passion but in the character and the dialogue created for him by writer-director Christopher Nolan. Of course, every Batman story explores the nature of good and evil—or more specifically the often blurry line between the two. *The Dark Knight* takes the Batman-Everyman story in fresh directions, ones that are germane to a world confronted with terrorism. The movie raises the question: What is worse, or more demonic, a terrorist with principles (even if those principles are nothing grander than accumulating more money) or one without?

Ledger's Joker presents the terrorist as übernilist. He lives only to destroy (and the bigger the bang, the better) what others have painstakingly built.

Our tendency has been to imagine that the Osama bin Ladens of the world are like this—nihilistic terrorists, the epitomes of evil because they irrationally want to tear down our freedoms. But surely it is more accurate to see bin Laden as operating out of his own radical, though radically wrong, principles. It says something about the state of American discourse—as well as the excellence of this film—that a tale based on a comic book could actually elevate public debate on this point.

The *Dark Knight* presses an even more haunting and important question than that of anarchistic terrorism versus “principled” terrorism. At the end of the film it is decided that though District Attorney Harvey Dent has gone criminally insane and murdered several people just prior to his own demise, the masses of Gotham City cannot bear that truth. Dent had been seen as the “white knight” of Gotham, the incorruptible public servant who fought unerringly for justice and peace. Batman and Commissioner Gordon conclude that Gotham’s masses need to have a symbolic (though dead) hero. So Batman assumes the blame for Dent’s vigilante killings. Dent is gloriously—if illusorily—remembered as a hero.

In choosing this course, Batman assumes the role of neoconservative. The neoconservatives in and near the Bush administration believe that dark and even terrible means must be used to protect America. They also worry that Americans can’t live with that truth, so they need to be told a version of Plato’s noble lie. Therefore the use of torture is euphemized. Constitutional rights are swept off the board, the costs of the Iraq war hidden, and power concentrated in a very few hands, and all the while the masses are told that everything the nation does in its war on terror represents (to paraphrase from another comic book) truth, justice and the American way.

Batman and his counterparts in our real world cannot conceive of an institution that pursues justice and goodness without resorting to lies, noble or otherwise. The starkest question *The Dark Knight* presents the church is this: Can we live with justice, peace and truth? Or has the sign of the cross been eclipsed by the sky signal of Batman, the neoconservative?