

Evil is the reason we need *lots* of things, not just police

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[The president's speech in Dallas this week](#) was an excellent performance of a difficult task, a task that's inevitably political as well as moral and quasi-pastoral. After a tragedy like this, a foreign observer might assume the issues are pretty straightforward: a protest found activists and cops side by side in the street, where things stayed peaceful, even friendly. Then, from far away, deadly shots rang out. But, this being America, and this being a protest of state violence against black people, and the shots being fired by a black man targeting cops with an assault rifle, the politics are of course polarizing and tribal and explosive. So Obama had to do his job as griever in chief while balancing his words just so.

There was just one point where I thought he missed it. Near the emotional peak of his speech, Obama said this: "We know there is evil in this world. That's why we need police departments."

The statement is striking not because it's false—it isn't—but because it's so woefully incomplete. Yes, one thing police do is respond to the results of evil in the world. But the existence of evil is also why we need protest movements, and police *reform*, and stronger civilian oversight. State power can be used effectively against evil; it can also embody it. That's how evil works. So, better to continue the statement:

*We know there is evil in this world. That's why we need police departments. It's also why we need democratic institutions—and, sometimes, democratic protests—to keep the police accountable.*

It would have been a natural extension—a more forceful statement—of his earlier comments about how police aren't perfect, either. And because the Dallas PD has been a leader in reforming police practices and improving community relations (as Obama detailed), such a statement about evil could have come in the form of praising them for their efforts to resist it in their own house, not condemning them for being susceptible to it in the first place.

Evil in the world is why we need the police to stay around but not stay the same. A useful reform agenda is not anti-cop, it's pro-accountability, pro-resistance-to-evil. It includes things like these:

- Set up structures for civilian oversight
- Make it easier to report police misconduct
- Establish independent investigation and prosecution procedures
- Require body cameras

If these sound like practical and common-sensical and mainstream policy ideas, they are! And it's easy, in our binary political context, to assume that such a list must represent some sort of creative third way between factions. It doesn't. It's drawn from a policy agenda by We the Protesters, a leading activist group that came out of Ferguson. And [the complete list](#) includes links to police departments that are already doing some of the things We the Protesters is calling for.

There is, in short, already good reform work being done to help police continue fighting the evil without while getting better at resisting the evil within. The struggle is between people and forces of evil everywhere, not between the state's legitimate force and the external evil it encounters.

I know Obama understands this theological framework, maybe more so than any of his predecessors. I wish he'd said so more clearly instead of falling back on a cops-vs.-evil applause line. Yes, evil is real. It's why we need police; it's also why we need to hold them accountable. It's why we need the Black Lives Matter movement.