

Even a necessary evil is evil

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Some people see violence as an absolute wrong. Others see it as a sometimes necessary evil, with considerable variation as to just how often these times come up. I'm at the dovish end of the latter group: I believe that there are times—not many, not remotely as many as American foreign policy consensus or law enforcement norms would have it, but *some* times—when a violent action might be the least-bad available option.

But a necessary evil isn't a virtue; "least bad" doesn't mean "good." And it's alarming when people articulate a view of violence as not just a regrettable means to an end but essentially the good and right thing to do.

Former vice president Dick Cheney went on *Meet the Press* Sunday to talk about the Senate torture report. To no one's surprise, Cheney remains hawkish on interrogation. To the possible surprise of those who believe that words have meanings, he maintains not only that the CIA program wasn't torture because the Bush administration said it wasn't but also that it wasn't torture *because 9/11 was worse*—as if "torture" refers to "really bad violence" rather than to a particular set of violent techniques captors use to break down captives. [Juliet Lapidus has more:](#)

Did any of the details from the report "plant any seed of doubt?" asked [Chuck] Todd. "Absolutely not," Mr. Cheney answered.

What about the fact that "25 percent of the detainees" turned out to be innocent?

"I have no problem as long as we achieve our objective" answered Mr. Cheney, meaning "to get the guys who did 9/11." For the record, Mr. Cheney did not "get the guys" — at least not the main guy. His successors did. And despite the narrative spun by "Zero Dark Thirty," it looks as though torture did not contribute meaningfully to tracking down Osama

bin Laden.

Mr. Cheney added: “I’d do it again in a minute.”

That’s a remarkable statement. For the sake of argument, let’s pretend for a moment that “enhanced interrogation” was obviously the right call given the information we had at the time. Now that we know the extent of the horrors our guys created, now that we know how many of their victims were innocent of any crime, now that we know they did this in exchange for little to no good intel, now that we know the damage all this has done to our reputation abroad—you’d do it again?

Cheney would in a minute. Torture wasn’t a necessarily evil for him; it was simply the right thing to do.

Reading this reminded me of [Darren Wilson telling George Stephanopoulos](#) that he wouldn’t do anything differently in his fatal encounter with Michael Brown. Not even that it was a tragic mistake but an honest one, but that he *actually did the right thing* when he shot an unarmed teenager multiple times.

I don’t believe for a moment that the violence in either of these situations was necessary. But even if it was, a necessary evil is both necessary and *evil*. Yet again and again, Americans betray a deeply felt belief that violence can amount to something better than the least-bad option.