

Sorry, Innocent Bystanders

The world is full of problems, and most people want government to solve these problems. When government solves problems, however, they usually create some new ones. If you're lucky, the victims of the new problems are the very bad guys who created the original problems. Serves them right! Yet more often, the victims of the new problems are innocent bystanders. They've done nothing wrong; they're just caught in the crossfire.

Like who? Let's start with babies in Nazi Germany. The babies didn't start the war. They've never hurt a fly. But it's hard to kill the Nazis without putting the babies' lives in grave danger.

You don't have to be a pacifist to realize that this is a tragic situation. Imagine trying to justify it to the babies: "You're totally innocent. I get that. But Nazism is so horrible that I'm going to put your lives in grave danger anyway. I'm so sorry. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me." This is an intellectually honest position, but oh so bitter. It's far sweeter to invoke collective guilt, say "They had it coming," and kill indiscriminately.

You might reply, "Well, the intellectually honest position is demotivating." But that's not quite true. Yes, acknowledging innocent bystanders demotivates indiscriminate killing. But it strongly motivates the search for an approach with lower collateral damage. Given humans' ubiquitous in-group bias, this is a feature, not a bug.

Wartime naturally highlights the most gruesome abuse of innocent bystanders. But many peacetime policies have the same structure.

Take gun control. Suppose strict gun control would eliminate all mass shootings. Who could oppose such a policy? Most obviously, the vast majority of gun owners who never have and never will murder anyone. Gun control supporters will naturally be tempted to demonize them. The intellectually honest thing to say, however, is: "99.99% of you gun owners are perfectly innocent. I get that. But mass shootings are so horrible that I'm still going to take your guns away. I'm so sorry. I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me." Demotivating? Well, it demotivates the promotion of strict gun control, but motivates the search for ways to reduce violence with lower collateral damage.

Or take refugee policy. Suppose banning all refugees would eliminate all terrorism. Who could oppose such a policy? Most obviously, the vast majority of refugees who are not and never have been terrorists. Opponents of asylum will naturally be tempted to demonize them (remember "rapefugees"?). The intellectually honest thing to say, however, is: "99.9999% of you refugees are totally innocent. I get that. But terrorism is so horrible that I'm going to refuse asylum anyway. I'm so sorry. I hope you can find it in your heart to

forgive me.” Intellectually honest? Check. Demotivating? Well, it demotivates indiscriminate rejection of refugees, but motivates the search for anti-terrorism tactics with lower collateral damage.

War, gun control, and refugees. I deliberately chose three radically different illustrations. I suspect that readers will angrily object to at least one of them. But I really don’t see how. Denying the existence of innocent bystanders is *convenient*; if they don’t exist, we don’t have to fret about them. Denying the existence of innocent bystanders is also *pleasurable*; what fun it is to unequivocally unleash your full arsenal against the forces of evil. Yet denying the existence of innocent bystanders is, above all, blind. Innocent bystanders exist. They have rights. You should think long and hard before violating them. And if you find no alternative, at least have the decency to tell them, “I’m so sorry.”