



# Morality's Muddy Waters: Ethical Quandaries in Modern America

*George Cotkin*

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In the face of an uncertain and dangerous world, Americans yearn for a firm moral compass, a clear set of ethical guidelines. But as history shows, by reducing complex situations to simple cases of right or wrong we often go astray.

In *Morality's Muddy Waters*, historian George Cotkin offers a clarion call on behalf of moral complexity. Revisiting several defining moments in the twentieth century—the American bombing of civilians during World War II, the My Lai massacre, racism in the South, capital punishment, the invasion of Iraq—Cotkin chronicles how historical figures have grappled with the problem of evil and moral responsibility—sometimes successfully, oftentimes not. In the process, he offers a wide-ranging tour of modern American history.

Taken together, Cotkin maintains, these episodes reveal that the central concepts of morality—evil, empathy, and virtue—are both necessary and troubling. Without empathy, for example, we fail to inhabit the world of others; with it, we sometimes elevate individual suffering over political complexities. For Cotkin, close historical analysis may help reenergize these concepts for ethical thinking and acting. *Morality's Muddy Waters* argues for a moral turn in the way we study and think about history, maintaining that even when answers to ethical dilemmas prove elusive, the act of grappling with them is invaluable.

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