

DEBATE THE POLICY SCRIPT

Would You Kill This Baby?

Here is a chance for you to rewrite the script and change the future. The setting is Braunau, Austria. The address is 219 Salzberger Vorstadt in a building known as the Gasthof zum Pommer. There, on Easter Sunday, April 20, 1889, a child was born. It is a year later, and you have been transported back to that time and are standing in the room with the baby boy. You are contemplating whether to kill him. If you do, you will be immediately transported back to the 21st century and will be beyond the reach of the Austrian police.

The infant is Adolf Hitler, the fourth child of Alois Schickelgruber and Klara Hitler. He is a normal, cute baby, as you can see in the accompanying picture. His parents love him, and their neighbors think he is adorable. Unlike anyone in Braunau or indeed the world in 1890, however, you know what the future holds. Baby Adolf will grow up to be the *führer* of Nazi Germany. His Third Reich will be responsible for the horrors of World War II and the genocidal acts against Europe's Jews, Gypsies, and others. You know that he will die by his own hand on April 29, 1945, in a bunker in Berlin. But by then it will be too late. Tens of millions of people will have died in the war in Europe, and 6 million Jews and other people deemed undesirable will have perished in death camps. Should you kill the baby now?

All this may seem macabre, but the point is to struggle with whether the laudable ends sometimes justify distressing means. A moral absolutist would not kill young Hitler. Someone who is amoral would have no qualms about doing it. However, most people, probably including you, are moral relativists who make moral decisions in a context. Complicating the decision even further, the world drama is partly an improvisational play. So in a caution much like *Star Trek's* "prime directive," interfering with the future is risky because you cannot be absolutely sure of what will occur in the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s if there is a simple marker reading "Adolf Hitler, 1889–1890" at the resting place in Braunau. Perhaps the Holocaust and World War II will never occur. Or perhaps a different German *führer* will come to power, one who is smart enough to defeat Great Britain before attacking Russia, to not declare war on the United States in 1941,



Would you kill this baby? Imagine you have been transported back to early 1890 and you are standing just out of this picture. No one but you and the child are present. The baby in this picture is Adolf Hitler, about a year after his birth on April 20, 1889, in Braunau, Austria. Given your knowledge of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, would you kill baby Adolf? Would the end justify the means? This and other issues are raised if one attempts to apply moral standards to the formation and conduct of foreign policy.

to focus on developing an atomic bomb, and to ultimately win World War II.

What Do You Think?

Should you rewrite the script of history by taking a pillow and smothering baby Adolf?

A third concern stems from what one might call "selective interventions." The United States has intervened in Haiti and Iraq at least partly in the name of democracy, yet in 1990 it sent its forces to defend Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait, both of which are ruled by distinctly undemocratic monarchies. Strong U.S. sanctions exist against communist Cuba, but U.S. trade with communist China is booming. Such selective interventions lead to a fourth concern: the suspicion that the invocation of international law and justice is often a smokescreen to cover old-fashioned imperialist intentions (Welsh, 2004; Orford, 2003).