The Lucifer Effect by Philip Zimbardo, 2008.

Power Systems Exert Pervasive Top-Down Dominance

My appreciation of the power residing in systems started with an awareness of how institutions create mechanisms that translate ideology—say, the causes of evil—into operating procedures, such as the Inquisition's witch hunts. In other words, my focus has widened considerably through a fuller appreciation of the ways in which situational conditions are created and shaped by higher-order factors—systems of power. Systems, not just dispositions and situations, must be taken into account in order to understand complex behavior patterns.

Aberrant, illegal, or immoral behavior by individuals in service professions, such as policemen, corrections officers, and soldiers, is typically labeled the misdeeds of "a few bad apples." The implication is that they are a rare exception and must be set on one side of the impermeable line between evil and good, with the majority of good apples set on the other side. But who is making the distinction?

Usually it is the guardians of the system, who want to isolate the problem in order to deflect attention and blame away from those at the top who may be responsible for creating untenable working conditions or for a lack of oversight or supervision. Again the bad apple-dispositional view ignores the apple barrel and its potentially corrupting situational impact on those within it.

The Power to Create "The Enemy"

The powerful don't usually do the dirtiest work themselves, just as Mafia dons leave the "whackings" to underlings. Systems create hierarchies of dominance with influence and communication going down—rarely up—the line. When a power elite wants to destroy an enemy nation, it turns to propaganda experts to fashion a program of hate. What does it take for the citizens of one society to hate the citizens of another society to the degree that they want to segregate them, torment them, even kill them? It requires a "hostile imagination," a psychological construction embedded deeply in their minds by propaganda that

transforms those others into "The Enemy." That image is a soldier's most powerful motive, one that loads his rifle with ammunition of hate and fear. The image of a dreaded enemy threatening one's personal well-being and the society's national security emboldens mothers and fathers to send sons to war and empowers governments to rearrange priorities to turn plowshares into swords of destruction.

It is all done with words and images. To modify an old adage: Sticks and stones may break your bones, but names can sometimes kill you. The process begins with creating stereotyped conceptions of the other, dehumanized perceptions of the other, the other as worthless, the other as all-powerful, the other as demonic, the other as an abstract monster, the other as a fundamental threat to our cherished values and beliefs. With public fear notched up and the enemy threat imminent, reasonable people act irrationally, independent people act in mindless conformity, and peaceful people act as warriors. Dramatic visual images of the enemy on posters, television, magazine covers, movies, and the Internet imprint on the recesses of the limbic system, the primitive brain, with the powerful emotions of fear and hate.