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American Innocence

Niebuhr & the Ironies of History: An Exchange

James L. Fredericks

Andrew Bacevich, a regular and perceptive contributor to *Commonweal*, has called Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* "the most important book ever written on U.S. foreign policy." I suspect he is right. The works of George Kennan, Averell Harriman, John Foster Dulles, Henry Kissinger, and George Shultz certainly hold political and historical interest, and I'm guessing that the writings of former Secretaries of State Madeleine Albright and Colin Powell will also continue to earn the attention of scholars—at least for a while. But while most works of former foreign-policy heavyweights diminish in significance over time, *The Irony of American History* remains as important today as it was when published in 1952. To the extent that Niebuhr's book addresses the urgent moral conundrums of the Cold War, especially the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, it is dated. Yet *The Irony of American History* also looks at the conduct of U.S. foreign policy from a theological and historical perspective, one that takes human fallibility and its social consequences as inescapable realities. Events today continue to show that we ignore these realities at great risk—especially when thinking about the relations between nations.

"All men," Niebuhr wrote in *Irony*, "are naturally inclined to obscure the morally ambiguous element in their political cause by investing it with religious sanctity." In this regard, his work shines a klieg light on the past decade's so-called war on terror and the current debate over the operations of our "national security state." Beginning in the months after 9/11, President George W. Bush used religious and apocalyptic images to frame the U.S. response to Al Qaeda's devastating attacks. Subsequently, high officials at the CIA, at the Department of Defense, and in the vice president's office oversaw decidedly ungodly programs of "coercive interrogation" at Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and "black sites" around the globe. Bush's successor, Barack Obama, has vigorously prosecuted the war against Al Qaeda even while ending U.S. military engagement in Iraq and winding down the war in Afghanistan. These seeming paradoxes make Obama an ironic figure of the kind that interested Niebuhr most—the self-conscious, existential irony of a

man who knows he must act in history while being unable either to control the outcome or to escape the moral ambiguity of his choices.

Niebuhr was very much a man of his turbulent century. Born into a Midwestern Evangelical Lutheran household in 1892, just in time to be swept up into the political idealism of the Progressive Era, he served as a young pastor in Detroit, preaching a fiery Social Gospel and practicing pacifist ethics. He took courageous public stances against the Klan and championed the cause of auto workers. In 1928, he moved to New York to take a teaching position at Union Theological Seminary and joined the Socialist Party of America. A trip to Germany shook him out of his dogmatic pacifism. Witnessing the rise of European fascism, he began to argue that resistance to evil sometimes requires military force. In 1932 he published *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, arguing against the naïve idealism of liberal Protestants and American progressives (including John Dewey). *Moral Man* would come to be seen as a prescient warning about Nazi ideology and an ethical argument for U.S. intervention in the European conflict, but Niebuhr's views led to heated debates with liberal and often isolationist thinkers, including those writing for the *Christian Century*, the leading journal of mainline Protestantism.

After the war and the demise of the Soviet-American alliance, Niebuhr criticized liberals who downplayed or ignored revelations about Soviet gulags and show trials. To the irritation of the right, however, he also repudiated the moral dualism that would neatly separate the evils of the Soviet regime from the virtues of American democracy. The red-baiting investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee were not as different from Stalin's show trials as many Americans wanted to think, Niebuhr cautioned. Moreover, there was no escaping the great moral irony of the Cold War: that in order to protect the world and preserve democracy, Americans had built weapons of mass destruction whose use would devastate life on the planet. *The Irony of American History* wrestled with these paradoxes in an honest and persuasive fashion, helping Niebuhr form alliances with like-minded liberals. With Arthur Schlesinger, Eleanor Roosevelt, Walter Reuther, and others, he founded Americans for Democratic Action to provide an alternative to both the naïve idealism of the left and the bellicose chest-thumping (and, later, witch-hunting) of the right. In the 1960s, he emerged as an out-

spoken opponent of America's misadventure in Vietnam. By the time of his death in 1971, Niebuhr had managed to alienate lots of old friends and allies.

Niebuhr's critique of democratic politics was built on three observations about human nature. The first was that we habitually justify our political institutions by cloaking them in an aura of sanctity. In this regard, he was a persistent critic of American exceptionalism, the profoundly Protestant notion that America has been singled out by God as a uniquely virtuous nation. Second, he held that despite the illusions of control and destiny political ideologies foster, history is intractable, its course and direction ultimately beyond human comprehension. Finally, Niebuhr argued that American history offers little evidence for either a triumphalist or a tragic interpretation, but rather is fundamentally ironic in nature.

Exceptionalism has been a powerful force in American history, from the first preachers of Plymouth Colony and the gentlemen deists of Virginia all the way to George W. Bush and his pledge to spread democracy throughout the world. To the amusement of some and the chagrin of others, Americans have persistently imagined themselves as a special people chosen by God to make a new beginning for mankind. We like to think that our values are beyond question and our motives pure. Niebuhr described this attitude as "the myth of American innocence," noting that Americans are often baffled and offended when others think badly of them, and generally insist that "our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions." These "pretensions of innocence" are associated with what Niebuhr called the "deep layer of messianic consciousness" that underlies U.S. foreign policy. Americans have often believed that God has summoned the nation to a special mission in the world.

Niebuhr turns to Augustine to dismantle these messianic pretensions. The sack of Rome forced Augustine to recognize that the Roman Empire was, in fact, not essential to God's redemptive plan, and that the meaning and direction of history lie beyond even mankind's most impressive achievements. At the height of the Cold War, Niebuhr provocatively argued that we cannot know whether the great river of history flows "inevitably" toward capitalism or collectivism. Both ideologies, he pointed out, pretend to have captured the ultimate meaning of history, promising that we can become masters of our own destiny. Yet Christian faith calls us to look on all political ideologies and their seductive simplifications with skepticism. Human beings lack the humility to accept the fact that "the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management," Niebuhr wrote. American exceptionalism, with its "pretensions of innocence" and its messianic ambitions, is deeply entangled in this human need for an ideology of history.

The illusions Americans cherish about the direction of history and the possibility of managing it make American

history ironic. This is Niebuhr's third great insight, and the one that helps us interpret the presidencies of Bush and Obama. Niebuhr uses "irony" in its dramatic sense. Irony in drama happens when the audience understands more about what a character on stage is saying or doing than the character does. Where tragedy brings us to tears for the greatness of the hero, irony brings out a laugh, and then a moment of comprehension, for "irony involves comic absurdities which cease to be altogether absurd when fully understood." Cervantes makes us laugh at the grandiose illusions of his "bogus knight," Niebuhr notes, but "we finally find ourselves laughing with a profounder insight at the bogus character of knighthood itself." America is Niebuhr's knight-errant.

American history certainly has its fair share of hypocrisy. Thomas Jefferson, for example, resolutely placed his "sacred honor" on the truth that all men are created equal—while running a feudal manor based on slave labor. But Jefferson's irony can be seen in his dream of America as a nation of self-reliant yeomen. American history, it turns out, had a different plan. We became an urbanized nation of factories and corporations. In the nineteenth century, America's divinely appointed role in the world had become clear to all: the inexorable course of history was calling us to spread the benefits of civilization across the continent and eventually into the Pacific. But these firmly held convictions about the innocence of our motives, the purity of our virtues, and the divine sanction of our manifest destiny led to a genocide against indigenous peoples and the colonization of the Hawaiian and Philippine Islands. There is a similar irony in American rhetoric extolling the self-reliant individual, laissez-faire economics, and minimalist government. In fact, throughout American history, the rich have manipulated government to make it serve their own interests.

George W. Bush was nothing if not fluent in the language of American exceptionalism. He spoke it with genuine piety and a certainty that was unnerving to some and an inspiration to others. His speeches touched on all the great themes. Americans, he said more than once, are "guided by a power larger than ourselves" and have "a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom." Again and again, he insisted, we have been a "friend and liberator" of the world, a "power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer." At West Point in 2002 he said, "We are in a conflict between good and evil." Increasingly his rhetoric disclosed a stark moral dualism. Terrorists represented "pure evil"—an evil beyond comprehension—and the mission of America was to destroy it for the sake of the world. Nor did Bush entertain doubt about the ineluctable course of history. "Liberty is the direction of history," he proclaimed—a history written, moreover, by an "Author who fills time and eternity with His purpose." "Evil is real," Bush insisted, but the purpose of history's Author is that "good will prevail

against it.” And America was the agent of the good that would ultimately prevail.

What Niebuhr would have seen in this attitude is not hypocrisy but irony. The sincerity of President Bush’s faith in American exceptionalism is beyond reproach; in fact, Bush is ironic *because of* his sincerity. He truly believed in America as a “power that went into the world to protect but not possess, to defend but not to conquer.” But the realities of postcolonial dictators and the global oil system have made our foreign policy far more complicated—and morally ambiguous—than the rhetoric of American innocence can tolerate. Niebuhr could have had Bush in mind when he discerned great irony in the fact that “we do not think of ourselves as the potential masters, but as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection.” It’s worth noting that this ironic point of view does not prevail in this country; even today, questioning American motives behind the debacle of Iraq invites criticism for “blaming America again.”

Seen through the lens of Niebuhr’s ideas, Bush’s confidence that God has called the nation to a messianic mission in the world and that America stands at the vanguard of history clearly prevented the president—or protected him—from recognizing that history cannot be managed. Indeed, both Bush and Osama bin Laden believed that, with God on their side, they could remake the Middle East; and history has proven both wrong. During the arms race of the 1950s, Niebuhr wrote that, ironically, America was “less potent to do what it wants in the hour of its greatest strength than it was in its infancy.” The same can be said of America today. The exercise of our immense economic and military power since World War II has led to the erosion of our security and now, in the midst of a war on terror, the abridgement of our rights. “The recalcitrant forces in the historical drama,” Niebuhr wrote in 1952, “have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning.”

Bush’s ironies are rooted in the illusions of his belief in American exceptionalism. Barack Obama’s ironies are of a different nature: they are the ironies of a man who is unable to believe these illusions. Perhaps the fact that he has read *The Irony of American History* contributes to this inability. In a widely discussed interview with David Brooks during Obama’s first campaign for president, Senator Obama was asked what he had learned from Niebuhr. The candidate

replied that Niebuhr offers the “compelling idea” that “there’s serious evil in the world,” and that “we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate [it].” We must make efforts to do so, but without “swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.”

This synopsis shows a clear affinity with Niebuhr. Yet Obama’s lack of faith in American innocence brings us only halfway to understanding the irony of his own position and actions. Obama understands that no ideology, including American exceptionalism, lets us know the course of history in advance, and no policy can succeed at managing that course. At last year’s National Prayer Breakfast, he observed that “While God may reveal his plan to us in portions, the expanse of his plan is for God and God alone to understand.” Obama’s irony is the inescapable irony of a man who knows he does not know enough to overcome the “moral ambiguities” of his policies, but who must act all the same, even when his actions violate his stated principles. The candidate who

vowed to close Guantánamo and give prisoners due process in federal courts has been prevented from doing so by formidable political resistance. The senator who voted against the war in Iraq became the president who believed he was required by circumstances to order a significant escalation of that same war. The president who, in a historic address to Muslims in Cairo, promised that America would defend itself while remaining “respectful of the sovereignty of na-

SPRINGTIME IN CHICAGO IN NOVEMBER

Springtime in Chicago in November.
My forty-first year to heaven.
My left hand wants to know
what my right hand is doing.
Oh. Sorry I asked.

First comes love, which I disparage.
I blight with plagues a baby-carriage.
Green means go and red means red.
Now we’re cooking with Sudafed.

Steer by, deerfly. I hereby declare
the deer tick on my derriere
a heretic. Derelict, hunker down.
Get the Led out, Goodman Brown.

Get thee behind me, Nathan.
Horseman, ramble on.
Springtime snows white hairs on me.
Green means go and go means gone.

—Michael Robbins

Michael Robbins is the author of the poetry collections Alien vs. Predator (Penguin, 2012) and The Second Sex (Penguin, forthcoming). He’s at work on a collection of criticism, Equipment for Living, forthcoming from Simon & Schuster.

tions and the rule of law" is the president who has decided we must infuriate Pakistanis with drone strikes that cause the death of innocents. These ironies are bitter. Addressing the Turkish Parliament in 2009, Obama said that "human endeavor is by its nature imperfect." Niebuhr would have nodded in agreement and added that this imperfection does not excuse us from taking action in history. Moreover, Niebuhr realized that our inability to manage history makes acting in history inevitably ironic.

Niebuhr would have had no difficulty recognizing President Bush's irony; indeed, he spent a good deal of his life pointing out the illusions Americans harbor in order to protect themselves from the moral ambiguity of their actions. But I think Niebuhr would have recognized Obama's irony as his own irony, the one that fit his sense of his own personal predicament. In his life, Niebuhr moved from progressivism and the Social Gospel to pacifism and socialism. Then an encounter with evil in Germany forced him to reevaluate his past and mount a strident criticism of the idealism of his former friends. In the process he came to believe that ideologies—whether American exceptionalism or Marxist-Leninism—are primarily lies we embrace in order to protect ourselves from the burden of having to act in the face of history and its unmanageable outcomes. In the end, Niebuhr did not allow himself the luxury of an illusion. He acted in history knowing that he did not understand its course and could not control its outcome.

In light of these ideas it is worth asking, how might Niebuhr advise the president on the use of drones? Would Niebuhr view terrorism with the same moral urgency he expressed over the rise of National Socialism in Germany in the 1930s? Or would he condemn the use of drones as he did the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Chasing such hypotheticals can be a fool's errand, but I think Niebuhr would have supported Obama's use of drones. In May the president gave a major policy address on this topic, and Niebuhr would have found much to admire in it. The speech made clear that Obama has considered every tactic, weighing the alternatives and doing the dreadful moral calculus such a weighing requires. He is well aware that, even after taking all precautions—which he outlined at great length—a president ordering the use of drones may well end up destroying innocent lives. And yet, he reminded us, "doing nothing is not an option." I believe Niebuhr would recognize the moral ambiguity of Obama's situation and the inevitable ironies of acting or failing to act. But Niebuhr surely would also have much to say about the danger of Obama's drone policy, especially about the remoteness such weapons afford us, and about the illusion that there is a technological escape from the *moral* realities of raining hellfire down from heaven on our enemies.

To dismiss Niebuhr as inconsistent or merely pragmatic, as some have done, is to miss both the point and the power of the moral scrutiny he applied to the dilemmas of political



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action. Today, though Islamic extremism has replaced Soviet communism in the minds of many as the principal threat to Western democracy, the need to recognize the moral ambiguities of our cause has not abated. To one degree or another, Niebuhr's insights will continue to be ignored—since we usually do not want to hear much about either our limitations or the unavoidably tragic dimensions of the decisions made in our name. It is my contention, however, that we are being led by a president who understands these dimensions. In Barack Obama's second inaugural address, the rhetoric of hope and renewal that filled his first inaugural was notably absent. In its place he stated a difficult truth. "We must act," the president reminded us. "We must act knowing that our work will be imperfect. We must act knowing that today's victories will be only partial." Reinhold Niebuhr could have written those words—about himself and his life, and about his country. ■

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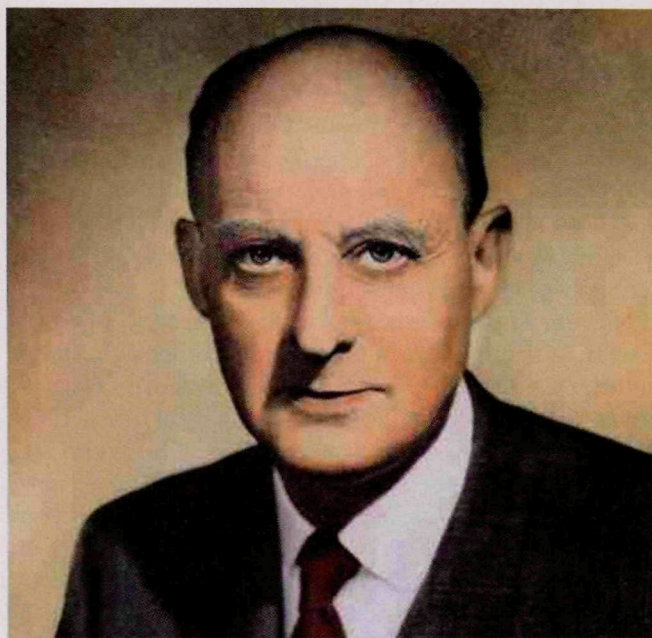
As a source of insight into the wellsprings of U.S. foreign policy, Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Irony of American History* is an invaluable text. If you want to understand the ambitions, claims, and conceits animating the United States during its rise to power and still lingering today, then Niebuhr's your man and *Irony* the place to look.

As a policy handbook, however, *Irony* is all but devoid of value. When it comes to concrete and immediate concerns—dealing with Iran's nuclear ambitions, winding down the Afghanistan War, or preventing another bout of North Korean bad behavior, for example—Niebuhr's not much help.

To the statesman beset with problems, Niebuhr may offer warnings, but he provides little by way of actionable guidance. At best, Niebuhr's counsel serves as the equivalent of a flashing yellow traffic light at a busy intersection. Go, says the light, but proceed very, very carefully. As to the really crucial judgments—Go when? How fast? How far? In which direction?—well, you're on your own.

The statesman who heeds Niebuhr may avoid a certain category of egregious mistakes. When reaching the intersection, he'll at least pause and look both ways before hitting the accelerator. But heeding Niebuhr won't guarantee sound decisions or wise policies.

Barack Obama offers a case in point. Obama may well possess a Niebuhrean temperament, but the president has yet to demonstrate any particular aptitude for crafting foreign policy. To be sure, he has avoided the reckless misjudgments of his pedal-to-the-metal predecessor. For this, all Americans should be grateful. Yet as a basis for evaluating states-



Reinhold Niebuhr

manship, better-than-Bush can hardly suffice. In rankings where the Franklin Roosevelt of 1940–45 (not the FDR of 1933–39) represents the gold standard, Obama languishes as an also-ran. A notch or two above, say, Lyndon Johnson, he trails well behind Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and even Richard Nixon.

As Niebuhr himself recognized, international politics is a competition for power, the possession of power translating (however imperfectly) into security, prosperity, and the ability to influence. Here, according to the tenets of Christian realism, are the criteria by which citizens should—and history will—judge Obama's performance as a statesman.

Relative to that standard, the president's performance has been indifferent at best. Granted, like Nixon in 1969, he inherited a weak hand. But unlike Nixon, whose opening to China had transformative strategic implications, Obama has demonstrated little by way of vision and almost none of the dexterity required to translate vision into reality.

What distinguishes Obama's major foreign-policy initiatives—examples include the "reset" of U.S.-Russian relations, the "pivot to Asia," and above all the "new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world" promised in Cairo—is how little they have yielded in substantive terms. To quote Walter Mondale, "Where's the beef?"

The president's principal foreign-policy successes have been negative ones: deferring war with Iran; avoiding war with North Korea; endorsing the American public's strong desire to quit and then forget Iraq; and reframing the Afghanistan War so that the United States can depart without having to admit failure. Note that none of these successes qualifies as conclusive.

Reinhold Niebuhr would have little difficulty in explaining why Obama's record of achievement is so thin. Despite all the media-stoked hoopla surrounding his ascent to the