

'The Father of Us All': The Cold War Liberalism of  
Reinhold Niebuhr and the Paradox of America's Moral Insecurity

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In his *Second Inaugural Address*, President Abraham Lincoln gave us the words that present-day politicians strain to muster: “It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged.”<sup>1</sup> Lincoln spoke these stirring words during a time of incredible moral ambiguity. 145 years later there has been a flood of interest in theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and his awareness of the potential hubris in waging a struggle against extremism. His constantly shifting positions on liberalism and America’s global stature has led to disagreement between historians and politicians who claim his legacy on both ends of the political spectrum. What is indisputable, however, is Niebuhr’s belief in liberalism’s epistemological debt to the ideals of Christianity and the repudiation of America’s history as merely a blueprint for democracy that should be repeated, *sui generis*, elsewhere.

‘Cold War liberalism,’ a combination of welfare state domestic policy and ‘realist’ foreign policy, entered mainstream politics in America at the end of WWII. Realists regarded Stalin as a global menace, and international politics irresolvable in which America nevertheless had to participate. Consequently, this meant that discussion about America’s role in the world moved toward a pragmatic approach. Realism provided the intellectual basis of the Cold War, and Niebuhr took his place along with George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, and Arthur Meier

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address*, March 4, 1865.

Schlesinger, Jr. These pugnacious men were the leading philosophers of this new American realism and the primary intellectual apologists for the Cold War.

Niebuhr naturally incorporated the issue of the atomic bomb into his new philosophy until the appearance, in the late 1950s, of both Soviet and American arsenals of invulnerable nuclear missiles.<sup>2</sup> The prospect of a total nuclear war caused Niebuhr to question, and finally to abandon, Christian realism. The following account of this philosophical evolution will stand, in contrast to current explanations of nuclear pacifism, as a case study of the effect of modern technology upon western political thought.<sup>3</sup> In 1985, Richard Wightman Fox wrote the best well known biography of Niebuhr, wherein he paints a broad, sweeping view of Niebuhr as an early socialist, pacifist, and deeply contemplative religious figure who became increasingly alarmed at the disparity he saw between America's stated aims of freedom and equality, and the troublesome realities of economic determinism and unchecked political power at home and abroad.

My argument also seeks to compare present-day American dilemmas, including the war in Afghanistan, the health insurance debacle and the intractable right, to the threat of global catastrophe during Reinhold Niebuhr's time. Measuring the pace of American involvement in treacherous military actions like Vietnam, Niebuhr eventually extended his pessimism to future conflict. When Cold War liberals invoked the threat of Stalinism's expansionism and dire enslavement of its own people, they presaged the extremist threat of today. Communism as an ideology was to Niebuhr and other liberal intellectuals of the day predicated on the ethical problems with fighting an apocalyptic war. Today's military commanders must engage the

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<sup>2</sup> Scholars now call this development the "Thermonuclear Revolution."

<sup>3</sup> See John Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War," *International Security*, 15 (Summer 1990), 5-56; and John Mueller, "The Essential Irrelevance of Nuclear Weapons: Stability in the Postwar World," *International Security*, 13 (Fall 1988), 55-79.

enemy, but finding a balance between fighting an insurgent war and building a democratic world has been problematic at best.

In this regard Niebuhr found a meaningful, yet secular solution to the problems of his day. The assumption in this paper will be that without Niebuhr's continual confrontation with the evils of total war, policy makers and liberal think tanks could not have averted the challenges of the 1950s and early 1960s. However, it was Niebuhr's own misgivings of the relation of original sin to American hubris that somehow emboldened the liberal Cold Warriors. His sermons and lectures mark a path for liberal anticommunism that to some degree has been co-opted by the right in its war against terror. Nonetheless, the political ascendance of Barack Obama and the democratic majority lead one to believe that Niebuhr was not so far away from prophetic genius.

Fox describes Niebuhr's appearance on *Time* magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary cover on March 8, 1948 as sealing his reputation as the nation's leading theologian. He quotes senior editor and former communist turned virulent anticommunist Whittaker Chambers who wrote, "Niebuhr's gloomy view of man and history does not inhibit his belief that man should act for what he holds to be the highest good (always bearing in mind that sin will dog his action)."<sup>4</sup> Niebuhr retained a fund-raising and symbolic role with the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), delivering memorable speeches at conventions, such as one that he opened by saying, "I never believed in my country right or wrong, especially when it wasn't my country."<sup>5</sup> The ADA's stated aims included addressing liberalism's central themes of continuing the New Deal, solidifying America's voice in foreign policy, and the expansion of civil rights.<sup>6</sup> The creation of

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York, 1985), 233.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> "130 Liberals Form a Group on Right," *New York Times*, 5 January 1947, p. 5.

the ADA codified a split among liberals between the left, which included communists and pacifists, and more strident liberal thinkers like George Kennan and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

It is important to note at the outset that Niebuhr's influence on such political masters of persuasion was less in the realm of direct involvement as much as in keen guidance. As Martin Halliwell points out amply in his book *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture* (2005), the relationship between Niebuhr and Kennan, though distant from Kennan's point of view, is nonetheless credited with improving Kennan's understanding of the need for critical evaluation of the Soviets. Of Niebuhr's importance to Kennan, Halliwell quotes Ursula Niebuhr as telling Kennan, "I must tell you that Reinhold's enormous respect for you and your knowledge was combined with very warm personal regard . . . . He said to me, 'There is no one I feel more compatible with.'" <sup>7</sup> Halliwell goes on to aver, "Kennan was asked to give a commemorative tribute to Niebuhr at the annual meeting of the Academy of Arts and Letters in December 1971." <sup>8</sup> As if to confirm Niebuhr's respect for him, the fact that he [Kennan] said Niebuhr channeled the knowledge of "'our predicament'—the fate of the nation in both domestic and international politics" <sup>9</sup>—is surprising given that he claimed in the eulogy not to know Niebuhr personally." Tellingly, though, was that "Niebuhr's sentiments in the 1966 letter display a generosity of spirit that he rarely showed openly to his brother Richard, who was much closer to him in years." <sup>10</sup>

Perhaps not knowing the extent to which Niebuhr directly influenced other ideologues like Hans Morgethau might best be illuminated by Secretary of State Dean Acheson's feeling

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<sup>7</sup> Letter from Ursula Niebuhr to Kennan, 22 December 1971, Niebuhr papers, box 63, folder 2.2. quoted in Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 190.

<sup>8</sup> Halliwell, 188.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Kennan to Niebuhr, 12 April 1966, box 63, folder 2.2. quoted in Halliwell, 190.

<sup>10</sup> Halliwell, 189.

that “the phrase ‘pattern of responsibility’ meant that ‘we need to act with consciousness that our responsibility is to interests which are much broader than our immediate American interests . . . we must not confuse our own opinions with the will of God’.”<sup>11</sup> Leaving for the moment the idea that America’s power corridors were somehow influenced by Niebuhr, I argue that we can characteristically position him as a voice that announced to the American people that there were forces at work which required a theologian’s heart and an ethicist’s eye for the contradictions.

Significantly, it was Niebuhr’s stature as a theologian in the 1930s and 1940s that altered the landscape of liberalism by presenting an alternative to the Right’s assertion that America was invulnerable. Many writers today across the spectrum of political ideology acknowledge the rhetorical strength of Niebuhr’s argument against isolationism and for a pragmatic understanding of world affairs during the period 1945-1962.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, his thought is an essential meditation on the divide between conservative and liberal efforts to responsibly confront challenges to democracy during this period. Liberalism’s primacy after the Second World War contains important lessons for the struggle against extremism. However, Niebuhr’s stance often shifted on the use of preemptive military force, mindful as he was of liberalism’s central goals of fighting Communism and restoring opportunity at home.

Niebuhr was the archetypal American ‘Cold War’ intellectual. A leftist minister in the 1920s and an anti-utopian socialist in the 1930s (his finest book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* [1932] attacked technocratic optimism from the left), Niebuhr forsook his modern

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<sup>11</sup> Halliwell, 192.

<sup>12</sup> For explanations of Niebuhr’s Cold War theology and his influence on American political figures, see Halliwell, especially Chapter 6, “The Myths and Dramas of History: Niebuhr and Postwar Culture,” and Chapter 7, “The Achilles Heel of Democracy’: Niebuhr and U.S. Foreign Policy.” Also see Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power*, (New York, 2008). For Niebuhr’s own explanation of his view on American foreign policy, see *The Irony of American History*, (New York, 1952).

political visions during World War II for an old-fashioned Protestant doctrine based upon original sin. This new pessimism, which he would come to call 'Christian realism,' outlasted the war, and he consequently supported the American decision to confront the Soviet Union in 1945 and 1946, though his conception of Christian realism was with a liberal agenda.

Niebuhr's wholehearted, if guilt-ridden, endorsement of the Cold War decisively affected the course of American intellectual life, especially among Democratic party liberals, for whom Niebuhr's articles in *The Nation* and in his own *Christianity and Crisis* had been required reading. Many of these liberals, once eager to maintain amity with the Soviet Union after the war, followed Niebuhr's defection to the Cold War camp. Without this conversion of the American mainstream left, President Truman's decision to wage the Cold War would have divided the Democratic Party and prompted a political crisis. Schlesinger famously wrote of Niebuhr's influence starting with the formation of the ADA, "[It] marks perhaps as much as anything the watershed at which American liberalism began to base itself once again on a solid conception of man and of history."<sup>13</sup>

Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) addressed the problem of political evil with a resigned and despairing tone. Sin was likely to prevail in the end, and the best children of light could do was to resist it with their most effective means, namely, power, coercion, and the will to match the enemy's ruthlessness. Despite this, secular leaders were reluctant to address Niebuhr's seemingly naïve belief in the means of power justifying the ends. They needed to rationally examine this tendency of Christian Realism to fall victim to matters of ideological challenge vis-à-vis Stalinism and utopianism. Their common strand acted as a paradox to answer Niebuhr's claims of American irony.

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<sup>13</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center* (New York, 1949), 166.

Visions of international harmony seemed to Niebuhr unusually pathetic in the day of Hitler and Stalin, but he recognized the elemental realist dilemma—to oppose power with equal power is to risk becoming what one stands against. United Nations idealism was one thing, but “the moral cynicism and defeatism which easily results from a clear-eyed view of the realities of international politics is even more harmful.”<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr knew that the realist who justifies anything in the name of power is not a realist but one complicit in tyranny. The ability to maintain ends when means tend to overwhelm, he argued, distinguishes the philosopher of political realism. It is always a juggling act, with tragic overtones.

Moreover, by the war’s end Niebuhr had broken completely with Marxism. He had decided that Marxism suffered from the inherent defects of any utopian scheme that presumed that humans could transcend their particular self-interests in deference to a long-term collective ideal.<sup>15</sup> Further, he feared the growing corruption of leaders who based their political power upon “ultimate” principles rather than popular consent.<sup>16</sup> Like many on the American left, Niebuhr abandoned the idea of a programmatic Marxism after the war and came to condemn its manifestation in Stalin’s Russia.

At the same time Niebuhr also roundly belittled traditional liberals’ faith in the coming of world government, multilateral disarmament, and the demise of national sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Niebuhr understood that the recent horrors would not, as many hoped, simply erase age-old realities of

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<sup>14</sup> *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York, 1944), 186.

<sup>15</sup> This was the thesis of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932). For Niebuhr’s own account of his transition from Marxism, see his “Intellectual Autobiography,” Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds.), *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York, 1956). 8-9.

<sup>16</sup> *Children of Light*, 75.

<sup>17</sup> An excellent account of the politics, culture, and commentary on the atomic issue in the immediate postwar period can be found in Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light* (New York, 1985).

international politics. Our “inability to achieve a global order,” he argued, “is due not to a want of constitutional logic but to a lack of mutual trust between great centers of power.”<sup>18</sup>

International organization was fine as a limited, symbolic measure, but it would not be able to transcend the entrenched system of international relations.

It was Niebuhr’s emphasis on the nature of sin and the destiny of humankind that occupied the essence of his critique of communism and his attempt to get modern liberal thinkers to reevaluate American exceptionalism. In his book *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (2008), Andrew J. Bacevich writes about the need to restrain American incursion into the Middle East and other parts of the world. Relying on Niebuhr’s philosophy, Bacevich discusses the immanent need of present-day politicians to expand America’s influence overseas at the exact moment when the rest of the world is skeptical of American interests and motives.

He writes,

Realism in this sense implies an obligation to see the world as it actually is, not as we might like it to be. The enemy of realism is hubris, which in Niebuhr’s day, and in our own, finds expression in an outsized confidence in the efficacy of American power as an instrument to reshape the global order.<sup>19</sup>

Bacevich goes on to restate Niebuhr’s belief that “‘the most significant moral characteristic of a nation is its hypocrisy.’ In international politics, the chief danger of hypocrisy is that it inhibits self-understanding.”<sup>20</sup>

Niebuhr attacked the growth of communism and fascism. Today, similar arguments are at work in the fight against extremism and political isolation. Bacevich presents the possibility that

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<sup>18</sup> “One World or None,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 8 (16 February 1948), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York, 2008), 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, 1932), 95.

extremism can be combated through conscious restraint of rhetoric. He points out that America cannot afford the conceit that God's will or its attendant interpretation of history's purpose should guide our foreign policy.<sup>21</sup> This opinion is the direct reading of Niebuhr's statement that

Perhaps the real difficulty in both the communist and the liberal dreams of a "rationally ordered" historic process is that the modern man lacks 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. It is a drama in which fragmentary meanings can be discerned within a penumbra of mystery; and in which specific duties and responsibilities can be undertaken within a vast web of relations which are beyond our powers.<sup>22</sup>

America's presumptive role in the creation of order is in fact ironic, as Niebuhr also wrote,

For the fact is that every nation is caught in the moral paradox of refusing to go to war unless it can be proved that the national interest is imperiled, and of continuing in the war only by proving that something much more than national interest is at stake.<sup>23</sup>

America's response to terrorism amounts to a paradoxical expression of national interest, but without this paradox clearly delineated, the fight cannot be effectively won. Niebuhr recognized the necessity of force in response to threats to the American way of life, but he came to this conclusion only when confronted with nuclear destruction.

The news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki failed to shake Niebuhr from his solemn temper, though this is not surprising given that he always spoke and wrote in solemn terms. He avoided the cataclysmic assessments made by other writers; he seemed almost bemused by the atomic

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>22</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (Chicago, 1952), 88.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 36.

bomb, for in a way it confirmed his pessimism.<sup>24</sup> He knew that the new weapon meant a quantitative jump in the level of destruction a future war would bring, but whether it was a qualitative change was something else again. He wrote in September 1945 that atomic warfare signaled a logical “climax” of saturation bombing; in a letter to James Conant in March 1946 he asserted “no absolute distinction could be drawn from the new level of destructiveness and the levels which a technical civilization had previously reached.”<sup>25</sup>

Niebuhr did admit that “the threat of mutual annihilation with which the development of the atomic bomb has confronted the world” was a situation that “proves that the atomic bomb heralds the end of one age and the beginning of another in more than one sense.”<sup>26</sup> But the atomic issue did not overwhelm him as it did many others; he avoided the dramatic and stuck to his original conception of politics and foreign affairs.<sup>27</sup> Despite this, Niebuhr managed to fit nuclear warfare within its peculiar logic. Niebuhr’s discouragement held fast when confronted with the first serious test of atomic politics, the American plan to establish international control of the bomb. He had little doubt that the global order to come would be enforced by national atomic arsenals; for him the issue was not to dream of one world but to rethink foreign policy in this new light. Niebuhr was undergoing a shift in his thinking from utopianism vis á vis most of the radical left in favor of a more thoughtful analysis of the influence of global military might. These changes in his thinking on first strike warfare contain the strength of his admonition

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<sup>24</sup> Robert E. Williams, “Christian Realism and ‘The Bomb’: Reinhold Niebuhr on the Dilemmas of the Nuclear Age,” *Journal of Church and State*, 28 (1986), 294-95.

<sup>25</sup> “Our Relations to Japan,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 5 (17 September 1945), 5.

<sup>26</sup> “The Atomic Issue,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 5 (15 October, 1945), 6.

<sup>27</sup> See Lewis Mumford, “Gentlemen: You Are Mad!” *Saturday Review of Literature*, 29 (2 March 1946), 5-7.

against hubris that threatened to undermine political advantage. His direct, though limited, conversation with George Kennan is an example of this rhetorical shift.<sup>28</sup>

Niebuhr's role as advisor to Kennan's State Department Policy Planning Group in the late 1940s solidified his stature as someone who never failed to elucidate right and wrong, and who took the difficult steps to ponder policy with irony. Halliwell writes of Niebuhr's diligent pragmatism in his introduction:

Never an academic specialist (of whom he was always wary) or a religious populist like Billy Graham (of whom he was highly critical), Niebuhr tried to develop a theological model of human nature without it becoming so inflexible that it lost its applicability to the spheres of work, public provision, institutional reform, education, ethics, and family life.<sup>29</sup>

By examining Niebuhr's contradictions as a thoughtful theologian and (often) contentious policy advisor, Halliwell describes a man who could be mistaken for an itinerant voice in a changing world. But the prophetic nature of Niebuhr's vision is that it does not mistake the heart of American promise for the consumer culture, instead finding "that vibrant democratic middle ground' that has 'stood largely unoccupied' in America, 'where ideas drawn from elite and popular cultures mix and mingle, and where the friction between idea and lived reality is most powerful and productive.'"<sup>30</sup>

Turning his critical view from left to right, Niebuhr also rejected militarist hopes for an American 'Pax Atomica.' He agreed with most atomic scientists that the Soviets were bound to develop their own bomb soon, thus making America's cavalier promotion of its atomic monopoly ill-advised. He also argued in early 1946 that America ought to declare a "solemn

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<sup>28</sup> See Halliwell, Chapter 7, 188-190.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 22, quoting Wilfred M. McClay, "Do Ideas Matter in America," *Wilson Quarterly* 27 no. 3 (Summer 2003), 84.

covenant” never to use the bomb first, as this would decrease foreign suspicions, after Hiroshima, and add to our moral authority.<sup>31</sup>

In his role with ADA, Niebuhr believed in bolstering the rights of working people. The struggle against totalitarianism would be won not simply on ideological grounds, but through social change. Hannah Arendt, the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), examined how power worked within nations to control people’s beliefs and actions. However, while she wrote that Nazism and Soviet totalitarianism were the same, Niebuhr and Schlesinger disagreed.

The former was absolutely cynical in its love of power. The second used “ruthless power” but hid “behind a screen of pretended ideal ends.” This is what made Soviet totalitarianism much more threatening. It could appeal to those searching for answers to problems of social injustice, especially the poor and downtrodden in the world, whereas fascism embraced power for the sake of power itself.<sup>32</sup>

Later, Arendt contrasted her earlier work in coining the phrase, “banality of evil” to describe what happens when ordinary people become involved in state hegemony. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) described Adolf Eichmann’s role in creating control of everyday Germans to carry out the terrible actions of Hitler’s Holocaust.

In a letter to his close friend and colleague John Bennett at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Niebuhr suggested that the Cold War “will try our patience and wisdom perhaps beyond endurance and beyond our moral resources.”<sup>33</sup> Then, in an editorial of February 1950 he noted the new levels of “moral perplexity” that faced those who struggled between pacifism and the sort of war that the new H-bomb promised, but he supported the American decision to build

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<sup>31</sup> “The Atomic Issue,” 5, 7. “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 6 (4 March 1946), 2. “As Others See Us,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 6 (9 December 1946), 4-5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 65-66, quoting Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York, 1953), 38; See also Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, 1951), 317.

<sup>33</sup> Niebuhr to Bennett, 1950. Fox, 214.

the ‘super’ bomb. It was another necessary step in the interminable escalation of military technology that defines international power.<sup>34</sup> For roughly the next decade Niebuhr maintained his pessimism.<sup>35</sup>

Niebuhr tempered this hard-line exposition by condemning preventive atomic war; preventive war is a violation of *Jus ad Bellum*. But he emphasized that timidity on atomic matters could lead to appeasement. “Our report will be a shock to the churches,” Niebuhr wrote to Will Scarlett, “for it shows that no absolute line can be drawn on any weapon.”<sup>36</sup> This fact has become crucial in formulating a response to terrorism in this age, such that, in an escalation of hostilities, America’s moral advantage suffers.

Niebuhr believed that the moralist construction of an “absolute line” between conventional and atomic war was a weakness in the face of the Soviet threat. In *Irony*, which was his most angry polemic against those who would appease Stalin or question American intentions in the Korean War, Niebuhr attacked the notion of atomic pacifism. Especially in an atomic age, reconciliation was impossible: “We are dealing with a conflict between contending forces which have no common presuppositions.”<sup>37</sup> Niebuhr also rejected the fatalistic (and thus secular) view that the “almost unmanageable destructiveness” of atomic weapons meant an end to the possibility of redemption.

Such “a purely tragic view of life,” he wrote, “is not finally viable. It is, at any rate, not the Christian view.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, he feared that a (perhaps necessary) policy of countering

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<sup>34</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 10 (6 February 1950), 2.

<sup>35</sup> American foreign policy today is faced with precisely this kind of smaller, yet no less dire foreign encroachment, with insurgent terrorism and the challenge of rogue nations. Niebuhr expected less international control of destructive means after 1945.

<sup>36</sup> Fox, 246.

<sup>37</sup> *The Irony of American History*, 66-67, 128, 173.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

Soviet expansionism “everywhere in the world” would “make the final conflict inevitable.”<sup>39</sup>

Here Niebuhr was arguing that an all-out atomic war against the Soviet Union could be a just war, and that such a war might be inevitable.

In February 1952 (after *Irony* had been sent to the publishers) Niebuhr suffered a serious stroke that debilitated him for the remainder of that year and much of 1953 as well.<sup>40</sup> By the time he returned to discussing atomic affairs at length, the intensity of the Cold War had abated: Stalin was dead, the Korean War was over, McCarthy was discredited, and Niebuhr turned his attention to the idea of coexistence and the American policy of “Massive Retaliation.”

Niebuhr anticipated in 1952 that American involvement in a global struggle meant that enemies gained power wherever there was an ethical vacuum. Niebuhr understood the dangers of a cold determination to dominate the world. In the 1950s, coexistence was under attack. Kevin Mattson points out in his book, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (2006) that the liberal intellectuals in Niebuhr’s circle saw risks in ceding the argument to conservatives who favored full retaliation. Mattson avers,

One narrative about “Cold War liberal” intellectuals dominates: they *acquiesced*. Intellectuals during the postwar years, this academic mantra goes, witnessed “embourgeoisement,” busy as they were “making it” as middle-class eggheads in fat and prosperous America. They were therefore “deradicalized,” moving out of the leftism that dominated Depression-era America during the 1930s into the center and sometimes careening rightwards during the affluent 1950s.<sup>41</sup>

Mattson correctly notes the intellectual imperative of the 1950s and 1960s to confront the divisions within liberal circles.

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<sup>39</sup> “The Two Dimensions of the Struggle,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 11 (28 May 1951), 66.

<sup>40</sup> Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 248-50.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great* (New York, 2006), 5.

Indeed, the contrast between coexistence and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles's New Look doctrine (which sought to deter the Soviets by threatening atomic war at all levels of potential conflict) provided Niebuhr with a made-to-order topic, to which he devoted extensive attention in 1954. Coexistence for Niebuhr represented the proper application of Christian realism to the atomic dilemma: in a letter to Will Scarlett he declared simply "for it is either that or oblivion."<sup>42</sup> In a *New Leader* article he stressed that coexistence with the Soviets was not to be confused with "toleration of any of the evils of communism." Rather, "it implies only one moral preference, and that is that survival is preferable to annihilation." But in the same paragraph Niebuhr added that we "must seek to repel Communist political and military expansion at every point." Here he reached the irresolute conclusion that coexistence should by no means be confused with appeasement.<sup>43</sup>

Massive Retaliation was a reckless strategy that not only entailed great danger but also damaged the "moral and political prestige" that America needed if it were to lead the western alliance. Dulles's policy of "brinkmanship" signaled to the world "we are heedless in measuring, or in failing to measure, the risks of global war."<sup>44</sup> Recognizing instead that finally confronting the Soviets meant final reduction of risk to an "ironic pretense" embodied all that Christian realism sought to oppose. In a piece in *Christian Century* Niebuhr warned that the sentimental idealism of those sympathetic to the Soviets was no worse than the "heedless idealism" of a sanctimonious anti-communism that renounced coexistence as "comradeship with tyranny." Niebuhr continued, "The first type of purists fortunately never had a chance to

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<sup>42</sup> Fox, 250-51.

<sup>43</sup> "The Case for Coexistence," *New Leader*, 37 (4 October 1954), 5. "Editorial Notes," *Christianity and Crisis*, 14 (31 May 1954), 66.

<sup>44</sup> "The Case for Coexistence," 6.

influence the policies of government,” whereas the “second type” can do so “because they are able to pose as hard-headed ‘realists.’”<sup>45</sup>

Niebuhr could point to the universalist left as carelessly trusting, and the crusading right as dangerously “hard-headed,” even to the point of needlessly risking atomic war. Christian realism and the doctrine of coexistence thus belonged in the rational center. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his liberal treatise, *The Vital Center* (1949) agreed. Schlesinger wrote, “Our present policy for world peace has thus settled into the formula of reconstruction plus containment,” however, “Most of this world is already in the throes of a social revolution—a revolution deriving its force from discontent on the land.”<sup>46</sup> To this statement today we can add the obvious fact that discontent with America itself is fueling extremism. Faced with al Qaeda inculcating terrorist sentiments for a holy war, we find ourselves returning to questions of ethics. The ethical question that Niebuhr faced was whether a just nuclear war was still possible. In stark contrast to many of his fellow theologians, Niebuhr was not one to skirt difficult questions and content himself with the rather riskless position of being “for” coexistence. Yet Niebuhr’s thinking about this reality would evolve similarly to today’s reluctance to use great force.

In an essay about Arthur Schlesinger’s book *The Cycles of American History*, Kennan describes the keen political history insight of Schlesinger. The American experiment was “embedded in profound historical consciousness,” Kennan wrote, “as part of an unbroken historical continuity, partially inscrutable, but still man’s greatest aid to self-understanding, that the ‘experiment’ was seen to have its existence.”<sup>47</sup> Schlesinger relies heavily on Niebuhr’s *Irony*

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<sup>45</sup> “Co-existence or Total War?” *Christian Century*, 71 (18 August 1954), 97.

<sup>46</sup> Schlesinger, 227-28.

<sup>47</sup> George F. Kennan, “The Historian and the Cycles of History,” in *The Liberal Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Challenge of the American Past*, ed. John Patrick Diggins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1997), 55.

for insight into the illusion propagated by foes of liberalism, that there is a “messianic” element to America’s journey. Niebuhr was convinced this would lead to suffering and misapprehension of America’s role in world affairs. Kennan quotes Schlesinger, “No nation is sacred and unique . . . All nations are immediate to God. America, like every country, has interests real and fictitious, concerns generous and selfish, motives honorable and squalid. Providence has not set Americans apart from lesser breeds. We too are part of history’s seamless web.”<sup>48</sup>

In 1955 and 1956 Niebuhr continued to call for *Jus ad Bellum* against the Soviets—he wrote Norman Thomas after the Hungarian and Suez crises that President Eisenhower “is becoming the Chamberlain of our day”<sup>49</sup>—while at the same time warning of the perils of modern warfare. This move seemed somewhat naïve given his earlier beliefs in the 1920s and 1930 of Marxism and pacifism. Later he would view such a position as inconsistent, but for the time he wanted to keep Christian realism vital. He managed this by opposing John Foster Dulles’s Massive Retaliation on one hand and calls for atomic disarmament on the other. Against these extremes Niebuhr set the amorphous idea of coexistence. In a letter to John Bennett in July 1955 Niebuhr was optimistic about Khrushchev and the international climate. “How interesting that the dread of atomic conflict which preoccupied us only five years ago should now have receded so far into the background,” he added, “perhaps too far.”<sup>50</sup> This last remark, which points to the moral dilemma of deterrence per se, accurately characterized Niebuhr’s forthcoming approach to the Bomb.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 56, quoting Arthur Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt; Mariner Books, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Fox, 265.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Fox, 271.

Instead of the “atomic dilemma,” or “modern methods of warfare,” Niebuhr referred in a May 1957 editorial to “The *nuclear* stalemate upon which our peace depends”<sup>51</sup> (Emphasis mine). The distinction is apparently semantic, and yet it shows how Niebuhr began to convert his views on nuclear war. In September 1957 Niebuhr despaired of the recent Soviet acquisition of intercontinental missile capability. In a gloomy article entitled “The Dismal Prospects for Disarmament” Niebuhr predicted little success for the bilateral talks then being held and wondered how this “stalemate” would remain peaceful in a time of political struggle for Europe.<sup>52</sup>

The answer seemed to arrive suddenly in the form of Henry Kissinger’s new work *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (1957). Niebuhr gave this book a glowing review in *Christianity and Crisis* (11 November) because Kissinger’s argument, that a reliance upon ultimate weapons was stagnant and dangerous foreign policy, appealed to Niebuhr’s realist desire for flexibility and to his fear of the all-out war that Dulles seemed to threaten so carelessly at any opportunity. Kissinger’s strategy of limited nuclear options by surgical strikes was favored because of their rationality. This clearly outshone the current state of inertia, Niebuhr reasoned, under which we were “incapable either of conceiving limited wars or of winning them.” At the end of the review Niebuhr concluded, “We must be ready to fight limited wars in terms of our objectives and to win them with the appropriate weapons.”<sup>53</sup> Such an approach, he determined, “makes more sense” than the fatalism of ultimate deterrence or the recklessness of massive retaliation. This strategy of limited nuclear war appealed to the realist side of Niebuhr’s Christian

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<sup>51</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 17 (27 May 1957), 66.

<sup>52</sup> “The Dismal Prospects for Disarmament,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 17 (16 September 1957), 113-14.

<sup>53</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 17 (11 November 1957), 147.

realism in a way that a stagnant condition of coexistence based upon the dismal threat of mutual destruction could not.

Soon after this new revelation Niebuhr recanted. To his apparent dismay he discovered that the “tactical” (his quotes) weapons touted by Kissinger were aka those dropped on Japan.<sup>54</sup> A “dozen Nagasaki bombs in Europe and Asia would mean the destruction of any moral claim for our civilization.” Did Kissinger, or the Council on Foreign Relations (which sponsored his book) understand this, Niebuhr demanded to know. Was it because George Kennan already “knew this truth” that he recommended that Europeans disdain nuclear weapons? Once burned, Niebuhr averred. “There is obviously no security in the armaments which our realists so insistently commend, nor in the disarmament proposals which intrigue our idealists.”<sup>55</sup>

Attacking, then, the foundation of ends justifying the means, Niebuhr found a resonant voice in his brother H. Richard Niebuhr. The approach Reinhold took to foreign affairs derived from his brother’s notion that God must reproach his believers to overcome the ego inherent in man. “Reinhold no doubt responded that his transcendent God was not a metaphysical essence beyond history, but a Judge who made man’s own historic responsibility possible—by giving him the freedom to act for justice while condemning his pretensions and complacencies.”<sup>56</sup> Lincoln’s *Second Inaugural Address* had codified this source of faith. God’s lessons for humanity stemmed in one sense from the scripture passage of Ezekiel 18:2 which reads, “What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, “The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge”? To Reinhold, God’s tolerance of the Israelites’ sinfulness was tempered by the coming generations. Indeed, as the passage continues,

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<sup>54</sup> “The Moral Insecurity of Our Security,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 17 (6 January 1958), 177.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-78.

<sup>56</sup> Fox, 154.

it is plainly spoken by God of his disapproval of the presumption of humankind to its greatness. Niebuhr, like this scripture, saw that in rejecting nuclear catastrophe, there was an alternative that could only be gained through faith in God and just action on the part of his children. Nuclear war was an encroachment on man's tolerance for absolutism despite H. Richard's belief that the world obviated faith.

Reinhold's critical disavowal of Kissinger's thesis signified a crucial shift in his approach to nuclear war. I would argue that this shift was not so much a change in Niebuhr's conception of a peaceful world as it was a reconciliation of his views on ultimate war with his earlier writings about the need for responsible uses of power. The official estimates of Soviet nuclear parity, the emergence of limited war theory, and the revelation of the destructiveness of tactical weapons forced Niebuhr to rethink American interests. The above developments, he wrote, "make it imperative that we put our main emphasis on the avoidance of general war rather than on restraint on the weapons which will be used in an ultimate war."<sup>57</sup> Justifying tactical nuclear war as somehow less than catastrophic, Niebuhr wrote Bennett, was simply a ploy to "quiet the conscience of the nations . . . I think this is monstrous and I am saying so."

International politics had changed. "The only issue is how the ultimate war can be avoided," Niebuhr declared, and "if war breaks out at all it will be a suicidal one for both victors and vanquished."<sup>58</sup> This categorical rhetoric was a decisive break with what Niebuhr had argued only two years earlier. The "excessive violence of atomic warfare" now meant mutual suicide; nuclear war was, by any traditional political or ethical definition, unwinnable. In this spirit of contrition Niebuhr also revised the 1950 Federal Council study, admitting, "the development of

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<sup>57</sup> "The Problem of Nuclear Warfare," *Christianity and Crisis*, 17 (24 February 1958), 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 5, 9.

the hydrogen bomb, of guided missiles and of tactical atomic weapons has made many of our conclusions otiose.”<sup>59</sup>

In the late 1950s and early 1960s Niebuhr persistently wrote about the nuclear dilemma, often using uncharacteristically dramatic prose. He began articles with unequivocal assertions. He concluded passages seemingly unrelated to the topic with pleas for nuclear peace. The need to avoid nuclear war surfaced as his dominant cause and as an ethical signal in disparate essays. Niebuhr moved to distance himself finally from the traditional, circumspect realism he had offered in earlier pieces on coexistence. Whereas previous articles had not pointed out the inconsistencies between coexistence and nuclear war, in 1958 Niebuhr simply decided, “Nuclear war is impossible.” This statement might seem disingenuous, but I believe Niebuhr merely restrained his cynicism long enough to formulate a response to total war. He repeated this point in his vast book *The Structure of Nations and Empires*. The advent of nuclear weapons advanced delivery systems made “large-scale war as calculated policy for either side impossible.” Nuclear war would not be the potentially just conflict envisioned earlier but instead an “ultimate and suicidal holocaust.” Moreover, the “line” between tactical and general nuclear war was so “symbolic and psychological” in the light of modern armaments that “there is no chance of avoiding the ultimate conflict if this line is obscured.”<sup>60</sup> This amounts to a truculent rejection of even the most careful of limited-nuclear-war strategies.

Niebuhr was at his most vehement in an article of September 1959, “Coexistence Under a Nuclear Stalemate.” The piece began not with his usual equanimity, with reference to recent events or discussion of Christian affairs, but rather with the claim that

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1. See also Bennett, “Niebuhr’s Ethic: The Later Years,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 42 (12 April 1982), 93-94.

<sup>60</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 18 (28 April 1958), 55. *The Structures of Nations and Empires* (New York, 1959) 11, 280.

The most obvious condition of our existence is the nuclear balance of terror. Each side has enough of the dreaded weapons to make the difference between victory and defeat irrelevant and to make it imperative for the whole world that a nuclear war be prevented. There is little prospect of reducing any general war to non-nuclear proportions.<sup>61</sup>

For Niebuhr, the “father” of realism,<sup>62</sup> to state such observations as so many indisputable matters of fact leaves one with the impression that on this issue he had become obstinate, almost drastic. Niebuhr was known for his convictions, but rhetoric such as “The most obvious condition of our existence” was different in kind.

Such fervency, however, neither blinded Niebuhr to political realities nor caused him at that point to abandon moral ambiguity. While he rejected the idea of just nuclear war, doing so even in desperate terms, Niebuhr continued to dismiss universalist solutions as utopian and careless. Nuclear war was to be avoided and this was now his dominant intellectual objective. But the facts of international politics remained, and so did the ambiguous ethical nature of diplomacy.

The political reality at issue was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. This struggle for power was even more lamentable in a nuclear age, perhaps, but it could not be wished away. If “the most obvious condition” of contemporary history was the balance of terror, the “second condition,” Niebuhr was sure to add, was that “the inevitable rivalries that have existed since the beginning of time continue.”<sup>63</sup> The job was to “cool off the animosities of the cold war” rather than yearn for “nuclear disarmament or the total abolition of nuclear

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<sup>61</sup> “Coexistence Under a Nuclear Stalemate,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 19 (21 September 1959), 121.

<sup>62</sup> Kenneth Thompson avows that George Kennan did indeed call Niebuhr the “father of us all,” in a paper Thompson delivered to Bard College’s conference on the realist tradition in American foreign policy in October 1991.

<sup>63</sup> “Coexistence Under a Nuclear Stalemate,” 121.

weapons.” This latter view presumed that a collective body could risk its existence (i.e., national sovereignty) in the hopes of achieving a greater or even universal good.<sup>64</sup> Even if the “good” in question was the chance of eliminating the specter of nuclear war, to Niebuhr such collective altruism was, by definition, impossible.

Niebuhr also clung to the idea of moral ambiguity. He followed his “Nuclear Stalemate” piece with a somewhat less strident essay in which he described a “cloud of uncertainty” that the balance of terror cast over the world. For this moral perplexity—and here Niebuhr plainly repudiated his earlier argument in *Irony*—“there are no Christian solutions if we mean by that purely moral ones.” The familiar dilemma of nuclear deterrence—neither disarmament nor the status quo ethically suffice—merely “raised the moral ambiguity of the political order to the nth degree.”<sup>65</sup> In bleak terms, this meant that a general nuclear war (or, more accurately, the need to avoid one) did not fall into the morally absolute category that Niebuhr wanted to resist using.

But in the fall of 1961 in the wake of the most overt confrontation yet between the two superpowers—the Berlin crisis—Niebuhr returned to cautioning against disaster. The confrontation in Berlin meant “we are wrestling with a resolute and resourceful foe on the very rim of the abyss of disaster.” And then: “Thus modern history has moved into the eschatological dimension in which all our judgments are made under the shadow of the final judgment. May the Lord have mercy on our souls.”<sup>66</sup> A few weeks later Niebuhr wrote to June Bingham about his fear that we could have “start[ed] the nuclear catastrophe for the sake of Berlin, even before we

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<sup>64</sup> *Structures of Nations and Empires*, 269.

<sup>65</sup> “The Long Haul of Coexistence,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 19 (30 November 1959), 172-73.

<sup>66</sup> “The Resumption of Nuclear Testing,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 21 (2 October 1961), 162.

have seriously negotiated. There must be some limits to moral ambiguity. I dont [sic] know where they are but this may be the limit.”<sup>67</sup> Niebuhr had consistently and unshakably employed this term, “moral ambiguity,” as an irreducible axiom of politics and as a theoretical foundation of Christian realism. After the Berlin crisis he questioned its very relevance; he would affirm this doubt regarding moral doubt in the following years. In the last decade of his life Niebuhr accustomed himself to a slower schedule. His erratic health problems forced him to quit full-time academic work and ease the rabid pace of publication for which he has been widely held in awe.<sup>68</sup>

Shortly after he wrote Bingham, Niebuhr participated in a *Christianity and Crisis* discussion on the “Nuclear Dilemma” with fellow theologians Bennett and Paul Tillich and political scientist Kenneth Thompson. Niebuhr agreed with Bennett’s criticism of the Catholic scholars that to go beyond a sanction of “deterrent retaliation” (i.e., a countervalue second-strike) to any policy of first-use “is morally abhorrent and must be resisted,” a position that the ardent realist Thompson suggested might assist the Soviets in “plotting a campaign of expansion and imperialism. I would prefer the moralist to master a strategy of restraint,” Thompson argued, “silence where policy dictates, and self-discipline rather than merely to protest with all right-thinking men the grave hazards of the nuclear age.”<sup>69</sup> In a review of Bennett’s collection *Nuclear Weapons and the Conflict of Conscience* the following spring, Niebuhr again criticized the “evasion” of those unwilling to face up to the novel moral situation of nuclear deterrence, “a problem,” he charged, “greater than mankind has ever faced before.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fox, 281.

<sup>68</sup> See Fox, Chapter 12.

<sup>69</sup> “The Nuclear Dilemma—A Discussion,” 200-203.

<sup>70</sup> “Nuclear Dilemma,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 17 (1962), 242.

In 1962, a year in which many were jarred into thinking seriously about the nuclear dilemma, Niebuhr began to firm up his new ethic. In *Christianity and Crisis* (2 April) Niebuhr responded to a letter from a reader who accused him of abandoning Christian realism when faced with “the most crucial problem of our age.”<sup>71</sup> Was it not inconsistent and secular, the reader asked, to affirm the balance of terror while abhorring nuclear war? Significantly, Niebuhr acknowledged the inconsistency, but did not address it further, preferring instead to discuss the relative emphases of arms control a Christian might support; this was an issue he usually found peripheral. Following this somewhat evasive reply, however, Niebuhr reviewed Frank Johnson’s *No Substitute for Victory*, a right-wing manifesto calling for nuclear intimidation of the Soviets. Niebuhr denounced the book with uncharacteristic acerbity. He described it as an effort to “cut contemporary history down to size and make it tolerable to tender imaginations” so as to be “comprehensible to retired admirals and retired millionaires,” and he mocked Johnson’s tendency to reduce international politics to “a battle between free enterprise and the hosts of evil.”<sup>72</sup>

More to the point, Niebuhr denounced the idea of winnable nuclear war, and in so doing identified this concept with the “radical right.” With Johnson as straw man, Niebuhr could argue from the sensible center and thus accuse Johnson of “deny[ing] the reality of the nuclear dilemma.” Hard-nosed types like Johnson were no longer foes of appeasement in the manner of Churchill but recorders of “adolescent daydream” who disposed of the awful possibility of nuclear catastrophe.”<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr fellow traveler Hubert Humphrey responded to Herman Kahn’s

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<sup>71</sup> Letter in *Christianity and Crisis*, 22 (2 April 1962), 48.

<sup>72</sup> “History as Seen From the Radical Right,” *New Leader*, 45 (16 April 1962), 24.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 24-25.

*On Thermonuclear War* (1961) in typical Niebuhrian fashion: “New thoughts, particularly those which contradict current assumptions, are always painful for the human mind to contemplate.”<sup>74</sup>

Niebuhr articulated this latter point with more clarity following the Cuban missile crisis. In an editorial he celebrated our escape from the “abyss” of a war in which the weapons to be used “make irrelevant the difference between victors and vanquished.” He hoped that the lesson of Cuba “at least laid a minimal bridge across a deep chasm.” This bridge was simply “a common sense of the responsibility to avoid a nuclear holocaust.” In a similar vein Niebuhr wrote of the need to “convince both sides that even a very unpeaceful coexistence is preferable to mutual annihilation.” This fact, he warned, meant that America needed to acquire the “virtue” of patience in a nuclear age. In contrast to the relative simplicity of World War II, Americans now had to grasp this peculiar state of affairs in which both pacifism and war with our most destructive weapons were forbidden.”<sup>75</sup>

Niebuhr wrote an essay in the February 1963 *New Leader* in which he explicitly put forth the new necessities for the nuclear age: the acceptance of a nuclear stalemate based upon the terror of countervalue deterrence and the avoidance of nuclear war as a political and moral absolute.<sup>76</sup> Niebuhr was clear on both points. He argued for tolerance of the “common peril,” as opposed to the universalist hope that the nuclear dilemma would erase the “survival impulse” of sovereign states. Yet this peril also incorporated the “novel” qualities of modern weapons: the unique nature of nuclear war is such that regardless of “the evils of communist tyranny . . . the

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<sup>74</sup> *Report from Iron Mountain: On the Possibility and Desirability of Peace* (New York, 1967), 64.

<sup>75</sup> “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 22 (26 November 1962), 205. “The Cuban Crisis in Retrospect,” *New Leader*, 45 (10 December 1962), 9.

<sup>76</sup> “History’s Limitations in the Nuclear Age,” *New Leader*, 46 (4 February 1963), 19.

evils of a general war with modern means of mass destruction are so terrible and so incalculable that it is *immoral* to prefer them to the present evils.” (Emphasis mine)<sup>77</sup>

Niebuhr also cautiously advanced a notion “of mankind’s realizing for the first time a sense of the unity of the human race in a nuclear age.” This utopian vision would not be based on a grand political scheme but upon a “Stoic universalism” and the Pauline doctrine of human solidarity. These amazing speculations were not meant to renounce his skepticism toward collective endeavors but were rather a sort of venturesome rebuff to the doomsayers who predicted the inevitability of a great power (i.e., nuclear) war. “Such defeatism,” Niebuhr wrote, “is morally wrong because it obscures our paramount moral duties.” These duties required optimism about human rationality, about a “common responsibility for avoiding disaster,” and so Niebuhr adapted.<sup>78</sup>

Niebuhr’s final substantial commentary on the nuclear dilemma was recorded in a discussion with Hans Morgenthau in February 1967 in a short-lived journal called *War/Peace Report*. As if to summarize, Niebuhr plainly affirmed the three main features of his philosophical shift. He rejected a nuclear just war: citing the requirement that military means must serve just ends, he declared, “That’s false now—nuclear war is certainly out of proportion to any ends.” But he stopped short of declaring a just war to be necessarily part of any international conflict. Rather, Niebuhr felt that to invalidate just war could lead only to one moral conclusion—war existed in the realm of intractable aggression; to nullify it would be to accept anarchy. To a question on the dominant ethic of foreign policy he responded, “I would say that the precarious nuclear balance makes it inevitable that coexistence be the first order of values.” Finally, in

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<sup>77</sup> See Fox, 287.

<sup>78</sup> “History’s Limitations,” 19.

response to a query about shifting geopolitical balance, Niebuhr changed the topic. “That situation will be unclear; you’re quite right. It won’t be the perfect peace—I don’t know whether we’ll ever have perfect peace. What we’ve got to do now is avoid Hell and nuclear disaster.”<sup>79</sup>

As the 1960s met their demise and the New Left retreated into post-structuralism, liberalism was attacked from both the right and the left during the 1970s. In his introduction, Mattson mentions Michel Foucault’s book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which described how liberal prison reform made new forms of social control, “a regime of self-control via the internalization of conscience.”<sup>80</sup> In spite of Foucault’s recognition that liberal thought carried with it the possibility of rationalism’s demise, or perhaps because of it, liberalism may have died with Niebuhr in 1971. Near his death, Niebuhr even learned that his famous Serenity Prayer, “God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; Give us the courage to change what should be changed; Give us the wisdom to distinguish one from the other” had been co-opted by Nixon’s “silent majority.”<sup>81</sup> Niebuhr’s legacy had been scuttled by the appropriation of the cause of freedom by the right, as also exemplified by the Reagan years. The addiction recovery group of Alcoholics Anonymous has used the poem for many years in a revised format.

The social theorist Langdon Gilkey was a student of Reinhold Niebuhr’s during the late 1940s, and had come to know of him after hearing Niebuhr deliver two sermons while Gilkey was a senior at Harvard in 1939. He writes in a review of Fox’s biography that his [Gilkey’s] view of Niebuhr “changed from one of skeptical secularism to something quite different . . . To my amazement [I] found myself shortly thereafter not only a convinced if inchoate Christian but

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<sup>79</sup> “The Ethics of War and Peace in the Nuclear Age: Discussion with Reinhold Niebuhr and Hans Morgenthau,” *War/Peace Report*, 7 (1967), 4-5, 7.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 290-291.

a “Niebuhrian” as well . . . I listened to him and talked with him at every opportunity that presented itself from 1946 through roughly 1951.”<sup>82</sup>

Gilkey correctly pointed out that Niebuhr’s evolution from Christian realism to abject doubt should serve as a milestone in American intellectual history. The important thing here was Niebuhr’s ability to discard reliable tenets of theology and philosophy when he discovered their sudden invalidity in the face of the nuclear age, and then to conceive of a new understanding of politics. His reluctant recognition was that this culmination of military technology had placed humanity in an inextricable condition of sin. Grace was therefore beyond the attainment of mortals, and any universal truth about human nature must stem not from an ideal but merely from the baser task of existence.

This is one reason why neoconservatives have appropriated Niebuhrian thought; in light of liberalism’s failed attempt to reconcile with American ambitions, religion became the realm of conservatives. Niebuhr, through his “constant dialogue” with American moral philosophers, paved a rough road for liberals to follow—one that depends on sound judgment—and spiritual strength in the hope for change. In spite of this, Schlesinger had championed Niebuhr’s primary emphasis in his book *The Vital Center*, when he wrote, “Consistent pessimism about man, far from promoting authoritarianism, alone can inoculate the democratic faith against it. ‘Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible,’ Niebuhr has written in his remarkable book on democratic theory; ‘but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.’”<sup>83</sup>

In this respect Niebuhr followed the work of Thomas Hobbes and then early international theorists such as Richelieu and Vattel: Hobbes believed that the only certainty about the human

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<sup>82</sup> Langdon Gilkey, “Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography’: A Critical Review Article,” review of *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, by Richard Wightman Fox, *The Journal of Religion* 68, no. 2 (April 1988): 263-264.

<sup>83</sup> Schlesinger, 170. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light*, xi.

animal is its instinct to survive in an anarchic jungle; Richelieu and Vattel were the first to transfer this Hobbesian logic to the collective, or state. Niebuhr concluded after the emergency of Mutually Assured Destruction, the superpower crises of the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the introduction of both strategic and ethical justifications of limited nuclear war, that a similar certainty might apply to humanity in general. With the existence of the human race, for the first time, conceivably at stake, how could one authenticate its will to survive?

Immanuel Kant argued late in his life, apparently hoping to refute the cynicism of Hobbes and Vattel that the only universal human obligation, in a world of otherwise material ethics, is to insure its own survival in the Hobbesian jungle. “Now we have a duty which is sui generis,” Kant wrote in his last major work, in 1791, “not of men toward men, but of the human race toward itself.”<sup>84</sup> Niebuhr’s Christian realism had rejected such universal obligations, or (as Kant put it) moral imperatives, in favor of an ambiguous balancing of original-sin-Protestantism with realist political philosophy. This made sense to Niebuhr until technology threatened realism’s *raison d’être*, human survival in a sinful world. At that point, Niebuhr realized, Christian realism became invalid. If the means of guaranteeing national survival—as always, the threat of war—threaten human survival, then the foundation of realism vanishes. The nation, after all, serves for the realist the sole purpose of protecting human security in the modern world of sin. To protect the nation by waging a war that could kill the human race—to save the village, writ to the largest order, by destroying it—turns realism on its head. Nuclear war becomes not an illogical but an absurd concept.

Importantly, the struggle against Islamic extremists today is embedded in this reality. The post-9/11 world has resulted in the greater hawkishness of political thinkers on the right and a

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<sup>84</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, tr. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York, 1960), 89.

more strident expression of control of nuclear weapons from the left. In combating terrorism at large in today's political climate, American politicians would do well to consider Niebuhr as a voice against strident application of military power and wartime escalation. Indeed, Niebuhr's own understanding of American hubris in the face of any foreign threat stands as a cautionary tale for the radical right, who generally take a hard-line stance regarding America's moral authority. On the left, Niebuhr's concept of original sin precludes turning away from the fight against extremism, but he recognized it as in the nature of things for human beings to strive for something different. Nuclear disarmament is a natural consequence of this line of thinking. And the requirement to control nuclear power stems from a question of our morality as human beings. As intellectual historian George Cotkin wrote in his essay on moral choices and evil, "History's Moral Turn," "In a time when our politicians and students rest too comfortably in certitude, history's moral turn may help create productive confusion, a willingness to recognize that behind all of our moral choices—not to mention choices made in the past—lurks paradox, tragedy, and irony. Understanding, as Kant once put it, is 'burdened by questions.'"<sup>85</sup>

In the film *The Usual Suspects* (1995), all of the characters face a moral dilemma; whether to complete a certain morally ambiguous crime while under the vengeful eye of the film's mythological Lucifer figure. Finding a mutual cause beneath which they tremble, they are forced to confront evil in the form of an evanescent specter. The story's ostensible hero is Roger 'Verbal' Kint, and Kint is someone who also exists in kind of a prophetic *concienciado*. So it was with the challenges faced by Niebuhr. Without a considered and pragmatic approach to totalitarianism, American society faced a startling moral slide. The threat of nuclear surgical strikes or some final collapse of the nuclear stalemate both meant that America faced the very

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<sup>85</sup> George Cokin, "History's Moral Turn," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69, no. 2 (April 2008), 294.

nature of evil. Niebuhr's sermons to the American public precisely identified the cause and the worry of the post-WWII era. As Niebuhr himself put it, the "false security to which all men are tempted is the security of power."<sup>86</sup>

The cultural historian Antonio Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Notebooks* about the inherent form of control exerted by states over the working class, and found that societies built the 'cultural hegemony' of the bourgeoisie from the ground up. Those in power, instead of primarily exerting influence from above, promulgated ideas among the people, which conspired to undermine culture's diversity in favor of a prescribed set of beliefs that the people came to regard as their identity. This hegemony was enforced through infiltration of the people of ideas of statecraft, personal autonomy, and political power. The bailiwick of media, lobbying, incredibly costly elections, and the ethic of capitalism amplify these forms of control. Foreign policy reflects these assumptions about the proper role of government in Americans' lives. In a time of political brinkmanship, war, and global terror, irreducible factors weigh against moral issues to the point of drowning out the solemn thinking of the Cold War liberals. As Gramsci wrote in response to the oppressive cultural hegemony of Italian Fascists,

But this is not culture, but pedantry, not intelligence, but intellect, and it is absolutely right to react against it. Culture is something quite different. It is organization, discipline of one's inner self, a coming to terms with one's own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one's own historical value, one's own function in life, one's own rights and obligations. . . . Above all, man is mind, i.e. he is a product of history, not nature.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 98, quoted in Bacevich, 119.

<sup>87</sup> David Forgacs, ed. *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. (New York, 2000).

Niebuhr understood that all great men and women must react to the world's predicament with a sense of their own precious humanness, with all its attendant sin and heroism, or else we are destined to repeat the mistakes of previous generations.

From *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (1929), we can take this early passing reference to Niebuhr's inchoate humanism. In informal notes about his life as a pastor, Niebuhr creates an intimate portrait of the man who would rise to greatness, albeit with a cynic's heart. He doesn't reconcile his thoughts to a greater purpose, but this 1926 passage shows his compassion. Niebuhr often spoke words that gave humanists solace:

I save myself from cynicism by knowing individuals, and knowing them intimately. If I viewed humanity only from some distant and high perspective I could not save myself from misanthropy. I think the reason is simply that people are not as decent in their larger relationship as in their more intimate contacts. . . . [One may see] the effort of this and that courageous soul to maintain personal integrity in a world which continually tempts to dishonesty, and the noble aspirations of hearts that must seem quite unheroic to the unheeding world.<sup>88</sup>

“Some of them were dreamers. Some of them were fools. They were making plans and thinking of the future.”<sup>89</sup> Niebuhr understood the need for a pragmatic, critical, and realistic assessment of the nuclear arsenals employed by opposing superpowers. Man's inhumanity to man reproached those in American government, but seeing where change could occur was the province of the man from Detroit. When the darker side of our humanity threatens to blow us into confrontations beyond our understanding, it was Christian realism that gave strength to Americans. Although

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<sup>88</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, (Louisville, 1929), 76-77.

<sup>89</sup> Jackson Browne, “Before the Deluge,” *Late for the Sky*, Electra/Asylum Records, 1974.

Niebuhr later conflated Christian realism with an ambiguous morality, the discussion of the liberal direction for America could proceed.

Arthur Schlesinger referred in his writing to Niebuhr's "tragic sense of the predicament of man."<sup>90</sup> The deep fissures of cynicism in America today insulate people from their own inconsistencies and ironies. If America is truly to become the leader of the democratic world again, as Niebuhr wrote, she can only accomplish that with a profound sense of historical irony. A belief in the sinfulness of humankind, but with an understanding of its capacity for justice, guided Niebuhr's faith in man. He turned to St. Augustine writing in *The City of God*:

And therefore the Apostle Paul, speaking not of men without prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, but of those whose lives were regulated by true piety, and whose virtues were therefore true, says, "For we are saved by hope: now hope which is not seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it."<sup>91</sup>

Moral luck affects the difficult choices we face, in the sense that our actions are guided by what providence dictates. Reinhold Niebuhr understood this, in a time when it was still unclear to many whether good or evil would triumph. Considering that Niebuhr spent his entire life faced with this question, is it surprising that he inspired us to justice? Men like my father, a divinity scholar at Union when Niebuhr taught there, benefitted from his constant consideration of man's capacity for justice. Yet the actions of everyday people, as Hannah Arendt wrote, can turn against morality as simply as switching off a light. What then, are we left with, if not hope for a better life, a better world, and "the courage to change the things that should be changed." Fear stands in the way of a better understanding of human nature. If Niebuhr's moral choices

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<sup>90</sup> Schlesinger, 147.

<sup>91</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God, Book I*, excerpt from Patrick J. Geary, *Readings in Medieval History*, (Ontario, Canada, 1997), 52.

were difficult, they were so when faced with annihilation. Niebuhr knew that there would come a reckoning of the ultimate sacrifices of our better nature.

Perhaps Niebuhr's inclination towards moral ambiguity was in fact a dilemma of his own creation to deal with the problems of Cold War liberalism. Yet his contemplative stance was the source of his genius, and it was indicative of his time, during which he was regarded the greatest living theologian. His ideas were as complex as they were influential in the forming of a liberal consensus. Still, it remains problematic for historians to apply morality to questions of circumstance. During Niebuhr's time, America was guided by a Christian conception of reality. This is not nearly the case anymore. Nevertheless, it is Niebuhr's contribution to the study of moral choices of right and wrong that mesmerizes the most thoughtful intellectual today. An example of his persistent thought comes from *The Irony of American History*. In it, Niebuhr clearly saw individual choice as guiding our morality. He wrote,

A purely tragic view of life is not finally viable. It is at any rate, not the Christian view. According to that view destructiveness is not an inevitable consequence of human creativity. It is not invariably necessary to do evil in order that we may do good. There are, of course, tragic moments and tragic choices in life. There are situations in which a choice must be made between equally valid loyalties and one value must be sacrificed to another.<sup>92</sup>

Niebuhr's allegory of the human condition criticized the motives of men and women who presumed to have a broad understanding of the nature and destiny of humankind. Finding solutions to the problems of the future depends, as Niebuhr did, on discerning the "penumbra of mystery in which specific duties and responsibilities can be undertaken within a vast web of relations which are beyond our powers."<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Niebuhr, *Irony*, 157.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

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