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The Humility of Restraint: Niebuhr's Insights for a More Grounded Twenty-First-Century American Foreign Policy

Christopher S. Chivvis

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Summary

The habits of primacy and exceptionalism that history has bestowed on today's U.S. foreign policy elites are unlikely to serve the nation well in a more competitive twenty-first-century international environment. Fresh perspectives on America's role in the world are needed. One such perspective can be found in the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose searching books and articles from the 1920s to the 1960s drew attention to the unintended consequences of U.S. power in the world, pointed out Americans' naïveté, and called for greater restraint and humility in U.S. foreign policy.

His intellectual corpus deals widely with the perennial issues of U.S. foreign policy, such as nationalism, the self-interest of states, empires, violence, technology, and the problem of peaceful change. He was a realist who diverged from other, especially later realists, in his skepticism about rationalism and his rejection of the nationalist *realpolitik* of the right and the left alike. He was an anti-Communist who nonetheless urged U.S. policymakers to proceed cautiously in its Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. Most of all, his critique of American exceptionalism stands as the classic argument for greater humility in U.S. foreign policy. It is a reminder that, however important the country's role in the world may be, it is too often undergirded by an idealistic naïveté that looks duplicitous to other societies and can undermine durable U.S. leadership.

Niebuhr's insights seem well-suited for the challenges facing U.S. statecraft today. His mix of realism, humility, and sensitivity to the broader moral framework in which the United States operates offer

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essential ingredients for a clear-eyed, healthy U.S. foreign policy. His warnings against the excesses of anti-Communist ideological competition during the Cold War seem increasingly relevant given growing tensions between the United States and China. The exceptionalism and national chauvinism that Niebuhr diagnosed in the 1950s is no less pervasive in the U.S. foreign policy establishment today, and this diagnosis seems especially important in light of Washington's recent struggle to reckon with its failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and to manage its global alliances.

Niebuhr's insights speak volumes to the present historical moment the United States finds itself in—characterized by resumed domestic fractures, seemingly intractable international problems, and a role in the world that is again in flux.

Introduction

America's historical experience of world affairs has not prepared it well for many of the future challenges it will face. In particular, the habits of primacy and exceptionalism that history has bestowed on today's U.S. foreign policy elites are unlikely to serve the nation well in a more competitive twenty-first-century international environment. Fresh perspectives on America's role in the world are sorely needed. Ironically, one way to develop these is to uncover old perspectives that have faded from view.

The work of twentieth-century U.S. intellectual Reinhold Niebuhr is a case in point. In a series of searching books and articles spanning from the 1920s to the 1960s, he drew attention to the unintended consequences of U.S. power in the world, pointed out Americans' naïveté, and called for greater restraint and humility in U.S. foreign policy. He preferred diplomacy and economic aid as tools of statecraft, but he was not averse to the use of military power.

Former president Barack Obama called Niebuhr one of his "favorite philosophers," but Niebuhr also influenced the thinking of a whole generation in his own time, from Arthur M. Schlesinger Junior to Martin Luther King Junior.¹ Interest in Niebuhr has grown some due to Obama's endorsement, but his ideas still factor only in limited ways in the regnant pantheon of international relations greats, even though he was part of an intellectual milieu that included Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, Arnold Wolfers, and other foreign policy thinkers who are better-known today.² This is no doubt because Niebuhr was not just an international relations scholar, but also an intellectual with a broader set of interests encompassing human nature, class and race relations, religion, and Christian theology.

Niebuhr's work is nevertheless significant in its own right. Unlike Kenneth Waltz, whose structuralist interpretation of relations between states was beginning to take hold toward the end of Niebuhr's life, Niebuhr left no single theory of international relations. But compared with Niebuhr's methodological complexity and breadth of interests, later neorealist theories like Waltz's, while elegant, feel thin.

Niebuhr was in many ways unique. His intellectual corpus deals widely with the perennial issues of U.S. foreign policy, such as nationalism, the self-interest of states, empires, violence, technology, and the problem of peaceful change. He was a realist who diverged from other, especially later realists, in his skepticism about rationalism and his rejection of the nationalist *realpolitik* of the right and the left alike. He was an anti-Communist who nonetheless urged U.S. policymakers to proceed cautiously in its Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. Most of all, his critique of American exceptionalism stands as the classic argument for greater humility in U.S. foreign policy. It is a reminder that, however important the country's role in the world may be, it is too often undergirded by an idealistic naïveté that looks duplicitous to other societies and can undermine durable U.S. leadership.

Niebuhr's insights seem well-suited for the challenges facing U.S. statecraft today. His mix of realism, humility, and sensitivity to the broader moral frame in which the United States operates offer essential ingredients for a clear-eyed, healthy U.S. foreign policy. His warnings against the excesses of anti-Communist ideological competition during the Cold War seem increasingly relevant given growing tensions between the United States and China. The exceptionalism, myopia, and national chauvinism that Niebuhr diagnosed in the 1950s is no less pervasive in the U.S. foreign policy establishment today, and this diagnosis seems especially important in light of Washington's recent struggle to reckon with its failures in Iraq and Afghanistan and manage its global alliances.

Niebuhr's insights speak volumes to the present historical moment the United States finds itself in—characterized by resumed domestic fractures, seemingly intractable international problems, and a role in the world that is again in flux. In its final sections, this paper considers Niebuhr's contemporary relevance directly. It begins, however, with an explanation of how his thought emerged from his encounters with the ideas and events of mid-twentieth-century history.

Niebuhr's Realism and Interwar Politics

"I always thought I was a fairly brutal realist, but I am beginning to suspect that the whole thing is a pose to hide the sentimental preacher," Niebuhr wrote in 1928.³ The introspective and self-critical nature of this comment was characteristic.

Niebuhr began the 1920s full of typical U.S. optimism. The United States had entered World War I under then president Woodrow Wilson's leadership in hopes of remaking the world according to a U.S. blueprint. Wilson's Fourteen Points inspired the nation, galvanized its allies in Europe, and even gave some hope to the Axis powers. Even after Wilson's plan for the League of Nations collapsed when the Senate rejected it, the United States' postwar outlook was still optimistic, especially compared to Europe's. It was the Roaring Twenties. Americans could buy Fords. The stock market was rising. Under Wilson's successors in Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, the country was still engaged in world affairs as a creditor and negotiator, although not yet as a globe-spanning military power.

Niebuhr initially shared this optimistic spirit. He supported Wilson at first. He forayed into international affairs with an essay for a 1915 competition held by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (and took third place).⁴ More importantly, his early ministry in Detroit was influenced by the Social Gospel Movement, a broad Protestant current with origins during the Reconstruction era that sought to apply the teachings of the church to contemporary social problems. Social Gospellers were progressives, concerned with race relations, factory conditions, child labor, and the plight of industrial workers. Most were also pacifists who had sought to keep the United States out of World War I. A noteworthy example was Wilson's secretary of state, William Jennings Bryan, who resigned when he believed that the United States was headed for war.⁵

Niebuhr soon, however, grew critical of the Social Gospel Movement and eventually of Wilson. The world he encountered throughout the 1920s was too full of egoism, conflict, and human limitations for him to see it otherwise. In 1923, he traveled to London, Paris, and Berlin as part of an academic exchange. In Europe, the human toll of the war was still raw. The bloodletting had ended in 1918, but the animosities after the war had persisted and had taken on new forms, especially in the struggle over German war reparations. France and Great Britain were in dire economic straits, as the nations struggled to make payments to veterans and compensate those who had lost so much in the conflict. Niebuhr absconded from a few days of lectures, traveling with a few companions to Germany's Ruhr Valley, which French forces had occupied in 1923 in a vain effort to force Germany to pay its reparations bill.⁶ Here the young pastor found a German people who were suffering at the hands of their occupiers. The German locals told him what he later called "horrible tales of atrocities, deportations, [and] sex crimes."⁷ His dismal impression could only have been intensified because Niebuhr was a German American and was fluent in German. Back in London, Niebuhr and his British interlocutors were exasperated by what they saw as needless French aggression.⁸ Against this harsh postwar reality, Wilsonian idealism seemed hopelessly naïve. The conditions in the Ruhr Valley, Niebuhr wrote, "rest upon the mind like a horrible nightmare . . . This, then, is the glorious issue for which the war was fought!"⁹

But Niebuhr's experience back home in Detroit was no less important in shaping his views of international affairs. Here Niebuhr saw a dark underside of the Roaring Twenties up close. Henry Ford had perfected the assembly line, and in 1914 he introduced the "Five Dollar



Photo 1: A Ford assembly line in 1913, the year before the introduction of the "Five Dollar Day." Niebuhr found the assembly line to be dehumanizing, turning workers into cogs in an industrial machine. This insight became a central part of his critique of liberalism. (Credit: National Archives, Records of the U.S. Information Agency (306-PSE-73-1534))

Day," which he promoted as a giant step forward for the working class.¹⁰ But on visiting a Detroit factory, Niebuhr found a dehumanizing assembly line of exhausted men working like automatons, little more than cogs in the larger industrial machine (see photo 1). Ford might pay five bucks a day, but only when the factory was open, and it was sometimes shut for months on end.¹¹ In 1927, Niebuhr noted that his town was "full of talk" about the new Ford Model A, yet, by his calculation, the car "cost Ford workers fifty million [dollars] in lost wages during the past year," a fact obscured by the hubbub over the car's release.¹² The Ford Motor Company was sitting on an enormous pile of cash but refused to make any contribution to unemployment insurance for its workers.¹³ "What a civilization this is!" Niebuhr lamented.¹⁴ "Naïve gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands."¹⁵

His thinking grew increasingly realist. There are, of course, many definitions and varieties of realism, not only within international relations but also within political science and the social sciences more broadly. It is hopefully sufficient here to define realism as an intellectual, moral, and practical tendency to emphasize the importance of seeing the world as it is and acknowledging the limitations of human powers to change it. At least this is the type of realism that developed in Niebuhr's mind and exerted its influence on his thinking. Realism of this kind is not without its risks, especially when too much realism devolves into rank cynicism, a risk Niebuhr understood well. He saw himself as a "tamed cynic," realistic and skeptical but never so cynical as to allow his realism to turn into nihilism of the sort he thought was rife in academia.¹⁶ He complained after a 1927 university visit that he was always glad to escape the company of academics "and consort with folks who take some things for granted."¹⁷ (Better to adopt an "Aristotelean" middle ground, although he questioned whether his moderation was just a consequence of his self-interest and perhaps made him too "reasonable" to be ethical or useful.)¹⁸ To join the cynics would be to deny the possibility of human freedom. Structuralist interpretations of history, like Marx's, offered great emotive power, but they were wrong in their historical determinism: Human history may ultimately be shaped by forces beyond human control, but humans could still influence its path, even as they struggled to understand its ultimate direction.

But by the end of the 1920s, personal experience and observations like these were already pulling Niebuhr away from the idealism of other Wilsonians and Social Gospellers and steering him toward a realist philosophy. The Great Depression reinforced his skepticism about their ideas. During the crisis, Niebuhr again traveled to Europe, visiting Germany, the

UK, and the Soviet Union. Back home, he joined the Socialist Party and unsuccessfully ran for office on its ticket.¹⁹ He was already gaining recognition as a social commentator through his writings and public speaking.

In 1932, Niebuhr completed *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which spells out the core of his, by now developed, vision of realism. The central thesis is that individuals and states are incurably egoistic.²⁰ The harsh postwar era showcased how egoism shapes all human social interactions at the individual, national, and international levels. Individuals struggle to overcome egoism, he wrote, but the problem is far worse for states. The social impulse that can inspire individual acts of selflessness between members of a family, town, or other small community is so attenuated between societies that there is little inclination toward moral behavior in international affairs. Even if there were such inclinations, national leaders have none of the room for moral action that ordinary individuals enjoy. Whereas an individual can choose to overcome his egoism through acts of self-abnegation, statesmen have no such authority, saddled as they are with the conflicting hopes and aspirations of their fellow citizens. This problem is worsened, not lessened, for democratic statesmen, who have even less room for maneuver than their autocratic counterparts: The institutions that make their societies more just, ironically enough, constrain their freedom of action for justice in the international arena. Nations also lack the individual's capacity for self-criticism, which is a requirement for ethical behavior. There "can be no ethical action without self-criticism, and no self-criticism without the rational capacity of self-transcendence," of which the nation is incapable.²¹ In other words, nations lack the necessary self-awareness.

Raw human egoism was thus the true center of Niebuhr's portrayal of international relations. Because humans are egoistic by nature, societies are always full of competing interests. Domestically, competing interests are controlled by a highly concentrated coercive power, namely the state. Internationally, this concentration of coercive power threatens other nations and thus creates insecurity. International insecurity then creates fear, which intensifies the preternatural lust for power that nations already have. Here, Niebuhr was describing what later came to be known as the security dilemma (sometimes attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau) and was identifying it as a defining feature of human existence at the international level.²²

Although critical of France for its treatment of Germany after the war, he recognized that the French desire to dominate its neighbor sprang from its natural desire for security. To Niebuhr, France "typified the human spirit with its *curious mixture of fear of extinction and love of power*."²³ He thus came to the important conclusion that there is no "sharp line" between "attitudes of defense and aggression" nor between the "will to live" and the "will to power."²⁴ The will to power, in other words, is part of the human condition as much as the will to live is, and the former is therefore always a source of strife in the world. All nations, like all individuals, harbor the drive to dominate others.

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From this perspective, the collective security programs of Wilson and the idealistic platitudes of the later 1920s—the Kellogg-Briand Pact, for example—were just pipe dreams. Niebuhr thought the League of Nations was well-intentioned, but he rightly predicted in 1932, as Japan launched its military conquest of Manchuria, that it would be utterly incapable of preventing war. He criticized the proponents of the Social Gospel and other idealists (including his own brother Reverend H. Richard Niebuhr) for their “glorification of the League of Nations as a symbol of a new epoch in international relations.”²⁵ As Niebuhr saw it, paths to justice, whether domestic or international, would always involve some element of coercive power. Just as workers would only get a fair wage via collectivization and strikes, force had to be balanced by force in international affairs. Humanity’s nature is such that social relations between groups will always be “predominantly political rather than ethical . . . determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group.”²⁶ To be clear, with these words Niebuhr is not claiming that rational and moral appraisals have no role in human affairs, only that power relations matter enormously and cannot be transcended.

These views put him sharply at odds with both the scientific progressives and left-wing Christian circles. Supporters of the Social Gospel abhorred violence as a means of social change. But while he continued to share their aims for a more just society, he increasingly thought hope of moral progress through religious piety, preaching, and scientific enlightenment a naïve notion at best, and, in some cases, even a product of self-interest.

His view that change requires coercion also put him at odds with leading philosophers of the left, especially John Dewey. By the 1930s, Dewey was the towering philosophical spokesperson for the Progressive Movement (see photo 2). He preached the persistent application of scientific reason, which would bring nature progressively under human control and generate social, economic, and international harmony. The big problem with the world, according to Dewey, was a lack of scientific reasoning, and the solution to the problem was education. Dewey implored his followers to “take the road which leads to the assured building up of social science just as men built up physical science when they actively used the techniques of tools and numbers in physical experimentation.”²⁷ But Niebuhr thought Dewey’s positivism was way off target:

The real cause of social inertia, “our predatory self-interest,” is mentioned only in passing [by philosophers like Dewey] . . . The suggestion that we will only make a beginning in intelligent thought when we “cease mouthing platitudes” is itself so platitudinous that it rather betrays the confusion of an analyst who has no clear counsels about the way to overcome social inertia.²⁸

The fact is that, Niebuhr goes on to explain, social science is wholly different from physical science because it involves the reality of human egoism and self-interest, which only coercion can overcome.

If Niebuhr's critique of positivist rationalism differentiates him from the idealists, it also differentiates him from some other, especially later, realists. Niebuhr took a limited view of human rationality and emphasized the ways in which self-interest and "moral pride" distort foreign policy, rendering such endeavors subrational. Human beings frequently fail to perceive the heavy influence of self-interest in their logic, and apparently rational foreign policies almost always conceal some deeper egoism, he argued. This insight underscored that it was "important to begin by recognizing that the force of egoistic impulse is much more powerful than any but the most astute psychological analysts and the most rigorous devotees of introspection realize."²⁹ Even ethically laudable foreign policies, such as the British government's condemnation of Belgian atrocities in the Congo before World War I, were motivated, according to Niebuhr, by a British desire to put pressure on the Belgians.³⁰ Such policies can last only as long as they are expedient.

The twentieth century's technological advances placed further limits on rationality in foreign policy, Niebuhr thought, because they increased the complexity of relations between states to an impossible level. It was too much to believe that human reason could master such an extraordinarily complex set of relationships, which were in constant flux. "There is simply not enough intelligence to conduct the intricate affairs of a complex civilization," he already had come to believe in 1923.³¹ People might be well-intentioned, or at least not malicious, but they would always struggle to successfully coordinate their actions to avoid violent conflict.

This pugnacious progressivism sounds a lot like some of his Marxist contemporaries, even though Niebuhr had already basically rejected Communism by the early 1930s. Niebuhr was a progressive because his religious convictions and personal experiences led him to take up progressive causes such as race relations and workers' rights. But those same experiences and convictions also led him to views reminiscent of how the apostle Paul or Saint Augustine of Hippo thought of the imperfectability of humankind, skepticism about human reason, and belief in the primacy of egoism. Dewey's liberalism was far more optimistic about the horizons for human improvement. Dewey's view was also far more representative of liberalism in the United States, a fact that Niebuhr later connected to the United States' comparatively rosy experience with industrialization in the nineteenth century. For Dewey, reason could eventually trump self-interest because the mind could be improved to enlighten individuals to listen to their better angels.

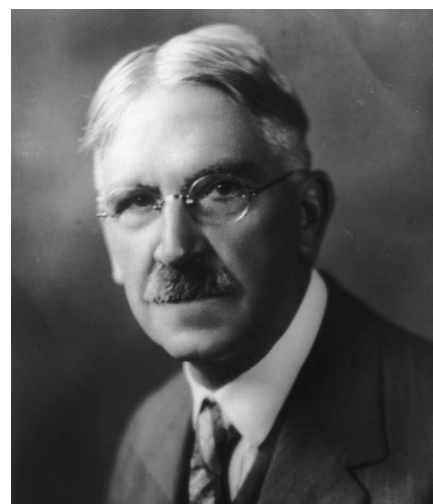


Photo 2: An undated photo of the influential U.S. philosopher John Dewey, whom Niebuhr criticized for excessive optimism about human nature. Dewey was a major force on the left in the United States. The two men shared similar concerns on many social issues, but Niebuhr found Dewey far too optimistic about the prospects for consistent progress through the application of reason. (Credit: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (cph 3a51565))

Dewey's pragmatism pointed toward the League of Nations and collective security in general, whereas Niebuhr's realism pointed toward the need for a balance of power.³² As the 1930s unfolded and the league collapsed in the face of Japanese aggression, Italian prime minister Benito Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia, and German leader Adolf Hitler's rearmament and quest for Lebensraum, it was self-evident whose theory held more water.

Against the Interwar "America First" Movement

Niebuhr's world was always populated by fearful, power-seeking, egoistic, and only partially rational nations whose interests were constantly clashing and that only vaguely grasped the forces affecting them. This was hardly a rosy outlook on the prospects for world peace. It could easily have invited a Machiavellian form of realpolitik or isolationism, but Niebuhr rejected these ideas, even against the deeply isolationist mood among many in the United States at the time.

By the 1930s, most Americans had come to view the nation's participation in the Great War as a major blunder.³³ More than 50,000 young U.S. soldiers had perished in battle, but Europe looked very much the same, riven by implacable hatreds and internecine feuds.³⁴ Niebuhr's experience in the Ruhr was itself characteristic of this disappointment. By the mid-1930s, an outpouring of popular books concluded that bankers and so called merchants of death had been the only beneficiaries of the conflagration. Even president Franklin D. Roosevelt himself, when he was elected in 1932, favored a largely isolationist policy, declaring that "our international trade relations, though vastly important, are in point of time and necessity secondary to the establishment of a sound national economy."³⁵ In one of his first moves as president, he tanked the 1933 World Economic Conference. Many New Deal policies also depended on a high degree of protectionism, not to mention the support of isolationist senators in Congress. Roosevelt shrank the U.S. Army's budget so drastically that General Douglas MacArthur puked on the White House steps.³⁶

In 1935, Congress passed the first of a series of neutrality laws aimed at isolating the United States from the mounting political crisis in Europe. These acts forbid the United States from providing arms to either side in the event of another war. "Let us turn our eyes inward," declared Pennsylvania's liberal Democratic governor George Howard Earle III at the time. "If the world is to become a wilderness of waste, hatred, and bitterness, let us all the more earnestly protect and preserve our own oasis of liberty."³⁷ In 1935, Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and Hitler's rearmament of Germany further encouraged the United States' isolationist wave, as did the Japanese atrocities committed during the Nanjing Massacre in late 1937 and early 1938.

Activists marched to commemorate the U.S. fatalities from World War I, peace strikes were held on college campuses, and members of Congress competed to prove their isolationist bona fides by strengthening the neutrality acts. They succeeded in 1936 and again in 1937, this time with the explicit intent of keeping the United States out of the civil war in Spain. In 1938, three out of four Americans supported the Ludlow Amendment, which proposed a mandatory national referendum before the nation could declare war.³⁸ Representative Louis Ludlow, a Democrat from Indiana, claimed that his amendment would do more “to keep American boys out of slaughter pens in foreign countries than any other measure that could be passed.”³⁹ The proposal was defeated in the House of Representatives thanks to Roosevelt’s hard lobbying against it.⁴⁰

Isolationism at the time was most closely associated with the Republican Party, but it went well beyond Republicans and was strong regionally in the Upper Midwest where Niebuhr had spent the first four decades of his life. (The staunchly isolationist *Chicago Tribune* was a bullhorn for the cause across the region.)⁴¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, isolationism was particularly strong among German Americans, who tended to be less critical of the nationalist tide sweeping Germany and blame French foreign policy after the Treaty of Versailles. Aside from a handful of U.S. volunteers, who traveled to Spain to fight the Fascists, most left-leaning Americans were equally skeptical of interventionism. Some even warned that intervention in Europe was a path to fascism in the United States itself.⁴² The desire to stay out of Europe was moreover increasingly associated with Christian voices such as the *Christian Century*, which editorialized in 1935 that “Ninety-nine Americans out of a hundred would today regard as an imbecile anyone who might suggest that, in the event of another European war, the United States should again participate in it.”⁴³ In short, Niebuhr was from exactly the religious, cultural, regional, and political milieu that would in most other cases have amounted to committed isolationism.

But when the Wehrmacht invaded France in 1940, Niebuhr did exactly what the *Christian Century* thought of as the mark of an “imbecile.” He rejected his socialist friends’ calls for nonintervention and backed up Roosevelt’s budding alliance with British prime minister Winston Churchill. As a German American who visited Germany several times in the 1930s and corresponded with clergy and others there—including the German theologian Paul Tillich— Niebuhr was quicker than most Americans to recognize the tragic path on which Germany had embarked.⁴⁴ His visits there had showcased the pain of the defeated nation and its growing resentment toward the postwar settlement. He recognized that Germans had been deeply hurt by World War I and now sought to repair their damaged pride by placing their faith in Hitler, the paradigmatic false messiah. Germans literally worshipped Hitler because his nationalism offered them a renewed sense of pride. The result was the “growth of a demonic religion out of the soil of despair,” a religion in which people were “ready to worship race, nation or power as God in order to avoid the abyss of meaninglessness.”⁴⁵ He watched as fellow theologian Karl Barth and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer were chased out of Germany after their 1934 Barmen Declaration attempted to reassert the spiritual independence of the church against the Nazi takeover.⁴⁶

Niebuhr was quicker than most Americans to recognize the tragic path on which Germany had embarked.



Photo 3: Berlin in July 1946, a few months before Niebuhr's warning that the devastation of the war was opening the door to a Communist takeover. Niebuhr's travels to Germany in the aftermath of the war intensified his calls for U.S. reconstruction support to its former enemy, while increasing his concerns about the intentions of Communist parties in Western Europe. (Credit: Bundesarchiv, Bild (183-H29659 / CC-BY-SA 3.0))

Recognizing the Nazi threat did not necessarily mean favoring intervention in European affairs. But as many Americans were increasingly disinclined toward deploying U.S. military might again overseas, Niebuhr was growing more open to the idea, at least philosophically. He had moved gradually away from the irenic position characteristic of his visit to the Ruhr in 1923 (see photo 3). For example, in 1927, he observed that pacifism tended to be more popular among the wealthy than the poor because those comfortable in their privileges have less reason to resort to coercive force.⁴⁷ In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, he argued that resorting to violence was not inherently wrong because “the achievement of harmony and justice between groups requires a measure of coercion.”⁴⁸ In his view, it was thus not enough to sympathize with Europe’s fascist victims. At some point, an exercise of power was needed to demonstrate that the sympathies amounted to more than idealistic utopianism.

When this point has been reached is a matter of judgment and particulars, and for Niebuhr these combined in the later 1930s. By the time of Mussolini’s Ethiopian campaign, Niebuhr had already come to favor the nonmilitary measures of the League of Nations to check fascism’s rise. “The more we fear to resist aggression now by non-military means because we fear that even such means might lead to war,” he wrote, “the more certain will we be to meet ultimately a foe who has strengthened himself during our days of hesitation.”⁴⁹

For the next five years, the evidence continued to accumulate—the bombing of the town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War in 1937 and reports of Hitler’s pogroms against German Jews, which intensified after Germany absorbed Austria—and it eventually overwhelmed the arguments against intervention in European affairs. Even then, however, Niebuhr remained uncertain about whether or not the United States should go beyond diplomatic condemnation and economic coercion and take military action against the Nazis.⁵⁰ As France fell before the Nazi blitzkrieg in May 1940, he left the Socialist Party and joined one of the main anti-isolationist groups, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, and began to argue for full U.S. action against the Nazis.

Niebuhr’s argument against the Nazis was not just a moral argument. It was also grounded in an analysis of the threat the Nazis and imperial Japan posed to the existing balance of power. Their attempts to overturn this balance could only be opposed by force and specifically the force of the U.S. military. But his resistance to the Nazis in particular also flowed from a recognition of their moral depravity, a subject he addresses in *Children of Light, Children of Darkness*, which was based on a series of lectures he delivered at Stanford University in 1944.

According to Niebuhr, Nazism was a primitive creed, a “barbarism” that offered Germans simplistic tribal unity as the answer to the chaotic individualism that had characterized life in Germany after World War I.⁵¹ This creed solved the problem of excessive liberalism in the worst possible way, with a tribal religion that deified the national leader. Nazism’s tribal nature meant that it would inevitably mistreat all members of society that were not German. The religious nature meant Nazism recognized no good greater than itself. It was, in Niebuhr’s schema, a “Child of Darkness” with an open door to the unrestrained use of military force against other nations.

At this point, Niebuhr also began to take a more positive view of democracy. He still held that democracy was born from bourgeois culture and thus was characterized by excessive individualism. He argued that its strengths lie elsewhere. The real value of democracy is in its combination of some semblance of unity with freedom for a diversity of voices, cultures, and ethnicities. Achieving this, he noted, requires that participants acknowledge the validity of the needs of others and are humble about the validity of their own views.

He also revisited some of the basic themes from *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, softening his view that moral action was beyond the capacity of statesmen. He still thought that it is hard for nations to act beyond self-interest and that the prevalence of self-interest in international affairs means that force always has to balance force, but now he concluded that an international order based on force alone would always be more difficult to sustain than one with at least some moral foundation. This is a theme that he picked up again in his later work, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*. It amounted, in practical terms, to a reminder that states’ actions always have a moral dimension that cannot be ignored.

Force always has to balance force . . . but an international order based on force alone would always be more difficult to sustain than one with at least some moral foundation.

Communism and the Problem of the U.S. Global Role After World War II

Niebuhr did not believe that the use of force is justified on all occasions. Far from it, he later railed against those who tried to draw flimsy analogies to this era during the Vietnam War: Nazism’s military nationalism “threatened the moral substance of Western culture, the Jews with extinction, and non-German continental nations with slavery,” he wrote.⁵² Setting aside the Eurocentrism of his views, Niebuhr is right that none of these threats were in play in Vietnam in the 1960s.⁵³ He resisted nearly all later U.S. military interventions, including against the Chinese Communists.

The United States is inclined to overconfidence about its capacity to judge the needs of other societies and achieve the changes that Washington desires.

The key problem with most such interventions is that “illusions about the possibility of managing historical destiny . . . always involve . . . miscalculations about the power and the wisdom of the managers and of the weakness and manageability of the historical ‘stuff’ which is to be managed.”⁵⁴ These are two of the most trenchant elements of Niebuhr’s warnings about the United States’ role in the world after World War II: The United States is inclined to (sometimes gross) overconfidence about its capacity to judge the needs of other societies and achieve the changes that Washington desires. This critique drew the interest of Obama and helped reinsert Niebuhr’s writings into the national conversation six decades after they were written, at a moment when the limitations and abject failures of U.S. nation building and overreach in many parts of the world after the September 11, 2001, attacks had begun to crystallize.

But Niebuhr’s analysis of America’s role in the world is broader than the subject of military interventionism as it is understood in the context of twenty-first-century U.S. foreign policy discussions. It serves as a warning about the limits of U.S. aspirations to construct a more stable and prosperous world order in general, especially around American values alone. Kernels of Niebuhr’s cautions about the United States’ role in the world are present in some of his interwar writings, but they come across with the most clarity in his classic, *The Irony of American History*, a book that is itself the product of his efforts to grapple with the problems of U.S. power early on in the Cold War. Before delving into these arguments, it may thus be helpful to sketch the course of Niebuhr’s thoughts and actions in the early years of the Cold War.

A Skepticism of U.S. Geopolitical Machinations

When World War II ended, some U.S. liberals initially sought to continue their hero Roosevelt’s wartime alliance with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. These liberals then split as tensions with Russia mounted. The postwar conference in the German city of Potsdam in July and August 1945 exposed deep rifts with Moscow. Efforts by then secretary of state James F. Byrnes to work out a postwar settlement faltered in the fall. Russia pressed for even harsher reparations from defeated Germany, was slow to remove its forces from Iran, and did nothing to withdraw from Eastern Europe or meet the commitment many Americans believed Stalin had made to upholding democracy there. All these disputes raised suspicions in Washington that Stalin might have far-reaching expansionist goals. By early 1946, Kennan had penned the Long Telegram from Moscow, outlining a theory of expansionist Soviet behavior and setting the intellectual framework through which officials in Washington came to view the conflict. In March, only nine months after Victory in Europe Day, Churchill, with then U.S. president Harry Truman at his side, proclaimed that an “iron curtain” had fallen across Eastern Europe.⁵⁵

What should the U.S. response have been? Some U.S. liberals favored a softer approach toward the Soviets because they themselves were Communists, or at least influenced by them. Niebuhr initially took their view, despite being the leader of one of the main anti-Communist organizations of the left, the Union for Democratic Action. These liberals initially believed Russia's uncooperative behavior sprang entirely from its insecurities about U.S. power. Based on this assumption, it followed that a rollback of U.S. power was presumed to be the best way to sooth nerves in Moscow and keep the wartime alliance from tearing further.

But as U.S. relations with Russia deteriorated over the next year, Niebuhr drifted away from the liberal doves. The doves held a "Win the Peace" conference in April 1946, where they called for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Europe, sought to press the United States to hand over its nuclear weapons to the United Nations, and praised the new so-called democracies now under Soviet control.⁵⁶ Niebuhr thought this position was rather silly and scolded the delegates for attacking Churchill without any "criticism for a Russian policy that has brought the whole of Eastern Europe under Russia's sway."⁵⁷

Nevertheless, he was still against anything that might deepen the growing divide between the West and the Soviet Union. He continued (correctly in historical hindsight) to view Soviet moves in Eastern Europe as at least partly flowing from Moscow's desire for security and distrust of the West, and he thought there was no reason to exacerbate the situation, especially given that Russia's domination of Eastern Europe increasingly seemed a fait accompli. Moreover, he wrote, U.S. slogans like "'free elections' and 'free enterprise' were irrelevant in that part of the world."⁵⁸ The Truman administration, he went on to write, was wrongly trying to deploy its "copybook versions of democracy" to the region without respect for the region's unique history and culture, which made these blueprints "as obtuse as Russian dogmatism" to the peoples there.⁵⁹ Niebuhr thought that any attempt to intervene in the region and break the deepening Soviet glacis would probably do more harm than good. On the contrary, leaving Russia to its machinations there might even be beneficial in the long run and "help, rather than hinder, the indigenous forces which resist its heavy hand."⁶⁰ This amounted to a fairly acquiescent position in the face of Soviet power in Poland and elsewhere. It was also probably a realistic stance for the time, given that the United States had withdrawn the bulk of its troops and was certainly not about to use the atom bomb to roll back the Red Army just for the sake of liberating the Poles.

Aiding the Former Enemy

But how acquiescent could the United States afford to be? The Truman administration was increasingly divided. On one side, secretary of commerce Henry A. Wallace, who represented the dovish forces within the Democratic Party, wanted to accommodate the Soviets. At the State Department, however, Byrnes

Any attempt to intervene or break the deepening Soviet glacis would probably do more harm than good.

What was clearly needed was a massive program of economic assistance to Germany.

avored a policy of firmness. Their disagreement was becoming very public. On this point, Niebuhr's views were profoundly informed by further travels to Europe, which he visited in the summer and again in the fall of 1946; there he found dire economic conditions, full of "anguish," "chaos," "confusion," and distrust among the victors.⁶¹ The United States' righteous defeat of the Nazis was becoming unjust in terms of the Americans' postwar treatment of German society, which was creating sympathy for Communism. "As a divided Germany sinks into economic misery, Russia hopes to conquer her ideologically by attributing this misery to capitalistic exploitation," he wrote.⁶²

Returning to Germany in the early fall of 1946, he penned a powerful piece for *Life*, depicting how dire conditions in Germany were facilitating Communist efforts to take over the country from within. What was clearly needed, he argued, was a massive program of economic assistance to Germany. Wallace's dovish position was understandable, Niebuhr claimed, but very wrongheaded in light of the lessons of the last decade: "It is a very tragic thing to wade through blood and spend the treasures of a generation in order to overcome one tyranny and then be faced with another," he said, but it would be far "better to face the facts and to avoid the mistakes made in confronting the last tyranny. In this policy there is some hope of peace."⁶³

The idea that the United States would provide economic aid to Germany, however, was anathema to the Republicans who took over Congress following the November 1946 election. After all, up until this point in modern history, it had always been the defeated who paid reparations to the victors, not the other way around. Moreover, aid to Germany would be costly for U.S. taxpayers. In addition, many Republicans feared U.S. dollars might be used to advance the evils of economic planning, socialism, and even the nationalization of U.S.-owned industry. In their minds, there could be no New Deal for the German foe.

Niebuhr loathed this inflexibility of economic ideology, skewering it for its naïve moral pride and warning that it was almost as dangerous to Europe as Communism itself. The postwar United States was "much too sure of its own virtues, much too confident that the characteristic institutions and accents" of democracy were universally applicable. It was also much too blind to the "peril of American power in the world community," he wrote in early 1947.⁶⁴ If they wished to stem the rising Communist tide in Europe, Americans would have to drop their blind attachment to the dogma of "free enterprise"—a "luxury" only they could afford—and settle for a more imperfect form of liberalism.

Many Republicans eventually came to look back on the Marshall Plan, which was announced in June 1947, as a good thing, and indeed it was. The policy had the downside, however, of intensifying the Cold War. In 1948, there was a Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, and pressure from Communist parties in Western Europe continued. Key states in Western Europe formed the Brussels Pact to marshal their forces against the Soviet threat. The Soviets shut off U.S. access to Berlin, prompting the Berlin Airlift. Moscow also

conducted a successful nuclear test, after which Washington responded by announcing that it had produced the “super,” a hydrogen bomb many times more powerful than the original atom bomb; joining the Brussels Pact; and thereby establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Adding to these tensions, the Chinese Communist Party routed the U.S.-backed Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek, provoking an intense and hugely consequential debate in Washington over who lost China.

The Problem With the U.S. Military Intervention in Asia

The Cold War was fully underway. But the United States’ role was still undefined. Many Americans were frustrated with the whole situation. As Stephen E. Ambrose and Douglas G. Brinkley have pointed out, “American success in 1917-1918 and 1941-1945 contributed to the conceit that the United States could order the world. So did the feeling of power that came with a monopoly of the atomic bomb.”⁶⁵ But if the United States was so powerful, how could the Truman administration explain that the country was now challenged all over the world by an ideology anathema to its own? Amid this cognitive dissonance, Republican senator Joseph McCarthy’s theory of a pro-communist conspiracy in the State Department had a simplistic appeal: cold-blooded treason—not weakness, policy failures, or the inherent intractability of most international problems—was to blame.

Against this backdrop, Truman responded to the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 by ordering a military buildup and adopting the hawkish recommendations of NSC-68, the strategic document that codified the United States’ Cold War containment policy. An increasingly energized Republican Party pressured the administration to be even tougher on the Soviets, while objecting to the end of military assistance to Chiang. Meanwhile, on the Korean Peninsula, MacArthur wanted to use nuclear weapons against Communist-led mainland China.⁶⁶

Although Niebuhr backed the Marshall Plan as a strategy to protect against Soviet advances in Europe, he was staunchly opposed to proposals for expanding the Cold War to Asia. Niebuhr favored U.S. membership in NATO, although his reasoning was primarily negative; if Washington had opted out, he feared, that decision would have raised concerns among Europeans that America First–style isolationism was making a comeback. In other words, NATO was mainly there for what national security professionals now call reassurance. He warned against expecting too much of the new organization “or sacrificing more important strategies to it.”⁶⁷ (While he was lukewarm about NATO’s military relevance, he nonetheless later stressed the value of the “Atlantic Community,” which rejected totalitarianism and managed to make its own “diversity tolerable under conditions of freedom.”⁶⁸)

Military action in Asia was a whole different kettle of fish.

Military action in Asia was a whole different kettle of fish. Niebuhr realized earlier than many others in the United States that the Communists in China and other Asian countries were driven more by nationalism than any enthusiasm for the philosophical tomes of a nineteenth-century German political economist. Eventually, he wrote, if left alone, Chinese leaders might come to favor Washington's friendship to Moscow's heavy-handedness.⁶⁹ MacArthur's plan to nuke China, however, would do the opposite given how utterly delegitimized Chiang was by his corruption and association with Western imperialism. The only path to unseating the Maoists was for democratic nationalism to spring up within China itself. The United States might have wished for this outcome and sought to support it if it did arise, but it was unwise (in Niebuhr's mind) to seek to bring democracy to China single-handedly when conditions were far from ripe.⁷⁰

Niebuhr's Critique of American Exceptionalism

In the five years after the end of World War II, Niebuhr's thinking evolved repeatedly. He went from initially holding a mildly accommodationist stance toward Moscow to favoring Truman and Byrnes's policy of "firmness" before shifting his views again in light of his hopes of keeping the United States from intervening militarily to roll back the Communist advances in Asia. His anti-Communism remained firm, just as his concerns about the United States' own pridefulness and its consequences for U.S. foreign policy intensified.

He continued his teaching and writing throughout this period, and his celebrity grew. He appeared on the cover of *Time* in March 1948.⁷¹ He increasingly took part in policy discussions with the Truman administration, especially through the State Department's newly created Policy Planning Staff, headed by Kennan. In 1950, he was invited to become a formal consultant to the department, prompting a so-called loyalty check by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which pored over his past for any and all signs of Communist sympathies. It should be clear by now that Niebuhr was not a Communist sympathizer, but the proliferation of his associations with so many left-wing causes in the 1930s might well have turned up connections that could have damaged his reputation. In any event, his investigation was never concluded, for he soon dropped his work with the State Department to focus on *The Irony of American History*.⁷²

In this book, Niebuhr depicted the core struggle between the East and West in essentially moral terms. On one level, the Cold War was a contest of political and economic interests, but on a deeper level it was a battle over differing ideologies and “moral cultures.”⁷³ The United States’ role in this struggle was to organize and protect liberal, bourgeois nations against the tyranny of Communism. Communism was “a vast religious-political movement which generates more extravagant forms of political injustice and cruelty out of the pretensions of innocency than we have ever known in human history.”⁷⁴ The Communist ideology was tyrannical because it took the claims of a specific group—workers—and transmuted their version of utopia into a universal ideology. The dream of every downtrodden worker, slaving away in factories and subjected to the caprice of bourgeois masters, was the promised elimination of property. To make matters worse, by concentrating economic and political power so heavily at the top, the Communist system made power prone to abuse by a monolithic class of elites. In contrast, the United States had preserved a “system of freedom” in which its moral pretensions might be challenged.⁷⁵ There was no such internal corrective in the Soviet system, which pretended to be a workers’ paradise, when it was really an oligarchy that channeled the resentment of the impoverished into the “engines of political power.”⁷⁶

Unlike others in his era whose critiques of the United States’ role in the world often sprang from sympathy for Communism and willful ignorance of the evils of the Soviet Union, Niebuhr criticized both the Soviet Union and the United States. Like Raymond Aron, the French critic of U.S. power who also attacked the French intellectual class for its embrace of Marxism despite evidence of its inhumanity, Niebuhr saw the weaknesses in both systems.⁷⁷ He ultimately was far more critical of Moscow than of Washington. U.S. culture tends to push power “under the rug,” Niebuhr explained, while Communist ideology acknowledges the reality of power and seeks to justify its extreme use through its embrace of “one final, resolute and unscrupulous thrust of power in the revolution.”⁷⁸ As the most powerful country in the free world, the United States had a responsibility to defend itself against this Communist threat, and fulfilling that responsibility was a virtue.

Mounting such a defense, however, was fraught with ironies and risks. The situation the United States found itself in was ironic in part because the greatest source of U.S. power, nuclear weapons, also posed the greatest risk of bringing about the country’s own destruction. To defend its civilization and culture, the United States threatened a war that itself would destroy the country. Some might call this relationship between the United States’ new global role and nuclear weapons a paradox, but Niebuhr insisted that it was more: It was an irony because, from an historical perspective, it could (and in his view should) be viewed as somewhat humorous, despite being deadly serious. The situation was also ironic because the United States’ wealth—yet another great source of its power—was the product of the country’s relative isolation from the rest of the world throughout the previous century. The United States had risen to global preeminence by dint of historical chance, not because it was particularly fit for the role. A naïve country had come to lead the liberal forces of the world against the tyranny of Communism. It was bound to tilt at windmills.

Niebuhr's exposition of American exceptionalism and its effects on U.S. foreign policy is a classic.

Niebuhr's exposition of American exceptionalism and its effects on U.S. foreign policy is a classic. His central point was that Americans saw themselves as purer than they could ever truly be in fulfilling their newfound role in the world. Most Americans viewed their country as a blessed land, ancient Israel reborn, and an exceptional nation in which the Reformation had culminated and opened the "new beginning" of a brighter chapter in human history.⁷⁹

These views, which Niebuhr traced to both Southern deists like Thomas Jefferson as well as the Calvinists who founded the New England colonies, were reinforced in the nineteenth century by the abundance of riches flowing from the United States' geographical good fortune, which allowed the nation to externalize its domestic tensions through economic expansion and westward enlargement. (Americans never admitted to themselves, he argued, that Manifest Destiny was just another form of imperialism, an expression of the new nation's will to power that involved the domination of peoples across the continent.)⁸⁰ The country's prevailing Protestant worldview, meanwhile, regarded material wealth as a sign of God's favor when it was not.⁸¹ Economic opulence had dampened nascent social tensions and had reinforced the exceptionalist view that the United States had found a way to overcome its social conflicts. This opulence created "moral illusions" about the ease by which social interests might be adjusted. All these historical forces generated an overabundance of optimism among Americans about the possibilities for reconciling competing interests during the Cold War.⁸²

For Niebuhr, the United States could not (and cannot) rise above the sweep of its history. "The irony of our situation," he writes, "lies in the fact that we could not be virtuous (in the sense of practicing the virtues which are implicit in meeting our vast world responsibilities) if we were really as innocent as we pretend to be."⁸³ The United States was taking on an enormous global responsibility, possessed enormous power, and would be confronted with the realities and messiness of the world, forcing the country to coerce others and take actions that had real-life consequences and entailed moral guilt that was inevitably at odds with its national self-image. The United States, in becoming a world power, would ironically be forced to come to terms with the fact that it was (and is) ultimately just a normal country, bound to errors and sin.

Niebuhr feared that the United States' encounter with the realities of global leadership might become so painful that the nation would retreat into the isolationism of the interwar period. Instead, the grim realities of the country's new role in the world, even when they required the use of force, had to be accepted, even when these realities inevitably hurt the United States' "moral pride."⁸⁴ If the country disavowed its responsibilities, it would be as guilty as it was bound to be in carrying them out. A disavowal of power might involve the "nation in even more grievous guilt."⁸⁵ Americans needed to come to terms with this new reality.

Niebuhr also feared the consequences of Americans' naïveté about power. Americans were naïve about power, he argued, because the free market had obscured power realities in U.S. society, making Americans less conscious of the power relations in which they participated. The U.S. bourgeoisie, who so rarely had been on the receiving end of economic coercion, was especially prone to innocence about power.⁸⁶ The United States' unsurpassed technological prowess, meanwhile, reinforced the Dewian view that political problems might be solved by technology and technocracy, rather than the skillful application of power. There would be no technological solutions for the Cold War. Perhaps the most important consequence of Americans' naïveté about power, however, was that it meant the United States had few antibodies to resist the temptations that the reality of outsized U.S. power created. So "deluded" was the country by its belief in its own innocence that it would be "ill prepared to deal with the temptations of power which now assail us."⁸⁷

There was also a risk that the United States' extraordinary experience with economic wealth would lead the nation to hope that international conflicts might be solved through economic growth alone. Failure to see that inequality was often the true economic source of conflict would complicate U.S. efforts in the developing world in particular. But an even deeper problem lurked behind this mistaken American belief. "Perennial conflicts of power and pride may arise on every level of 'abundance'" Niebuhr pointed out, "since human desires grow with the means of their gratification."⁸⁸ In other words, even if problems of international economic inequality could be overcome, the United States' focus on economic causes of conflict seemed unlikely in itself to yield lasting peace because conflict was (and is) ultimately not just about material differences and wants (even though these factors clearly mattered). In Niebuhr's estimation, conflict was also the consequence of the unpredictability of human nature, especially human beings' passions, pride, and jealousies.

American exceptionalism also risked moral overconfidence. The more that Americans believed they were a new Israel set apart not just from Europe but from history, the more they tended to insist upon the universality and inevitability of their own liberal model. U.S. liberalism was preferable to Communism in part because Americans separated economic and political power, because the U.S. Constitution purposely divided power, and because American practicality dampened ideological fervor for laissez-faire capitalism. This moderation in practice helped to reduce the appeal of the Communist forces in Europe and soften potential divisions between the United States and its less orthodox European allies. Still, liberalism's advantages over communism did not give the former creed any special claim to universal validity, Niebuhr wrote. Ultimately, liberalism was the utopia of the bourgeoisie, just as Communism was the utopia of the working class.

Perhaps the most important consequence of Americans' naïveté about power, however, was that it meant the United States had few antibodies to resist the temptations that the reality of outsized U.S. power created.



Photo 4: A June 1958 photo from the Army-McCarthy hearings. Niebuhr feared that McCarthyism was tearing the country apart and risked undermining U.S. moral authority in the fight against the very foe McCarthy claimed to be attacking. (Credit: United States Senate Historical Office)

Niebuhr predicted that efforts to export U.S.-style liberalism to the rest of the world would meet with greater resistance than expected and thus would be bound to engender resentment in Washington. In Asia, for example, Niebuhr found societies with historical and cultural experiences shaped by Western imperialism, an historical phenomenon universally viewed among these societies as a gross injustice and the primary if not sole source of their contemporary economic underdevelopment. These nations were wrong to blame imperialism wholly for their ills, he argued, but it mattered little, especially in a time when the link between U.S. liberalism and imperialism was being reinforced by Soviet claims that the United States' wealth had to be the consequence of U.S. imperialistic exploitation. (What else could explain

the great disparities in economic well-being between different societies?) This link may have been one of the most spurious notions of Soviet propaganda, but it was also one of the most problematic for the United States to counter, Niebuhr warned, for it permitted industrializing societies to blame their problems on someone else. The theory meanwhile gave the Communists an enormous advantage in terms of winning the ideological struggle in the developing world, permitting Moscow to galvanize anti-U.S. sentiments—ironically for the purposes of furthering its own imperialism.

The United States' high self-esteem would meanwhile make the country “insufferable” to other nations, just as individuals with too high a view of themselves are insufferable “in their human contacts.”⁸⁹ The country would have to muster extraordinary patience in dealing with societies with different histories and cultures. Doing so would require not only accepting the “menace of the spread of tyranny in the non-industrial world for many decades to come,” but far more importantly, it would necessitate recognizing that the spread of Communism was not due to some failure of U.S. policy or the faults of “some political or strategic miscalculation by this or that government agency or administration” as the McCarthyites insisted (see photo 4).⁹⁰ It was not the alleged perfidy of the State Department that had led to the spread of Communism in Asia. U.S. foreign policy could not be held accountable for events everywhere around the world. These naïve and grandiose expectations about the United States' role in the world were bound to disappoint, opening the door to McCarthy's show trials.

U.S. moral overconfidence was matched by the country's overconfidence in its ability to effect the changes that it believed were needed. As a scientific culture that epitomized Dewey's perspective, possessed such awesome technical skills, and had so successfully manipulated the natural environment to meet its material objectives, the United States seemed prewired for such overconfidence. And the country's bourgeois ethic of

voluntarism—according to which the free market offers any individual the chance to become master of his or her own destiny—further reinforced this notion. But humans, Niebuhr posited, are not atoms, and societies are not molecules. Human freedom means a randomness in the behavior of societies that would incessantly frustrate U.S. efforts to redesign them according to scientific principles and an ethic of hard work.

The potential for U.S. frustration at these realities, Niebuhr feared, created a further risk that the United States would lash out in impatience. The unfair retorts of the Communists, especially when voiced by the developing world, would generate hostility in Washington, which would be compounded by the country's belief that its virtue was above reproach. The anti-Communist fanaticism of the McCarthy era risked making the United States as bad as the Communists, for it deprived the country of its historical perspective and capacity for grace. The frustration that threatened to arise could only result in rash behavior and mounting hostility of the kind that ultimately risked a nuclear conflagration. The United States must avoid the tendency to “meet the foe's self-righteousness with a corresponding fury of our own.”⁹¹

Niebuhr summed up the situation in one of his most memorable passages:

But whether or not we avoid another war, we are covered with prospective guilt. We have dreamed of a purely rational adjustment of interests in human society; and we are involved in “total” wars. We have dreamed of a “scientific” approach to all human problems; and we find that the tensions of a world-wide conflict release individual and collective emotions not easily brought under rational control. We had hoped to make neat and sharp distinctions between justice and injustice; and we discover that even the best human actions involve some guilt.⁹²

What did Niebuhr think the United States ought to do in light of all these risks and realities? Most obviously, perhaps, the country had to “slough off many illusions which were derived from the experiences and the ideologies of its childhood.”⁹³ Otherwise, Americans would either “seek escape from the responsibilities which involve unavoidable guilt, or we [would] be plunged into avoidable guilt by too great confidence in our virtue.”⁹⁴

For Niebuhr, the solution to the Cold War would not be solely moral in nature. Power would play a critical role too. But a wise statesman would recognize that any lasting solution must have a moral dimension.⁹⁵ By this point, it is probably unnecessary to underscore that Niebuhr did not have in mind a moral solution that would involve the projection of U.S. views of morality on the rest of the world. He instead noted that the moral challenges to U.S. power and ideology must ultimately be recognized and addressed if there was to be a lasting and legitimate solution to the problem of the Cold War. Such a moral solution might even require some wise compromise or broadening of the United States' interpretation of its



Photo 5: Reinhold Niebuhr in December 1958.
(Credit: Bettmann/Getty Images)

values so as to accommodate the reality of adversaries' perspectives. To establish a community with other nations, the United States would have to do more to see what was contingent rather than universally valid about its values and ideals. A generous appreciation of what was valid in the practices and institutions of other nations, even when they deviated from U.S. experience, was also needed. In short, Washington's success in leading the free world turned upon "a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream, and a recognition of the values and virtues which enter into history in unpredictable ways and which defy the logic which either liberal or Marxist planners had conceived for it."⁹⁶

In practice, this meant avoiding the dual temptation of isolationism and the abuse of power. The United States had succumbed to the former in the 1930s, but now the country was at even greater risk of the latter. Niebuhr recognized that there is no "nice line to be drawn between" these two extremes, but this did not make them any less real (see photo 5).⁹⁷ Americans would have to accept that they would never be masters of their own destiny. The world would not conform to their designs; indeed, it would actively resist these designs in manifold ways that U.S. leaders would struggle to understand. This

did not mean the United States must "come to terms with tyranny" any more than it meant making the national interest the "final moral possibility of history."⁹⁸ As an extraordinarily powerful country, the United States would be more inclined toward the overestimation of its capacity for good in the world, but it also had to avoid the temptation to "hide [its] talent in the ground."⁹⁹

To establish a community with other nations, the United States would have to do more to see what was contingent rather than universally valid about its values and ideals.

A crucial challenge for the United States in this new world was thus self-restraint. Only by coming "to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue," could Americans see the ironies of their own world-changing historical moment and their country's role in it.¹⁰⁰ For Niebuhr the theologian, this perspective could best be achieved through religion. He thought president Abraham Lincoln's Christian perspective was the key to his ability to overcome the baldest injustice in U.S. history. The perspective mattered ultimately because it offered a vantage point for irony, one that made the observer capable of viewing the paradoxes and contradictions of the United States' role in the world from enough distance to see in them guilt, virtue, and an intertwining of the two.

Exceptionalism and American Statecraft Today

In 1952, the same year that *The Irony of American History* was published, Niebuhr suffered a partially debilitating stroke. He was still productive over the final two decades of his life, but at an ever-slower pace. He continued teaching at his longtime home base, the Union Theological Seminary, as well as at Harvard University and Princeton University. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1959.¹⁰¹ In 1964, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. He died in 1971.

The public's interest in his work has since been episodic. The most recent high point of interest came around 2007 when Obama, then a presidential candidate, was interviewed by David Brooks for a *New York Times* interview titled "Obama, Gospel and Verse." Brooks said the interview was going poorly because Obama was either tired or perhaps annoyed by the interviewer, so in a last-ditch effort to rescue the discussion, Brooks asked him if he had ever read Niebuhr. Obama responded at length in what Brooks called "a rush of words," as the presidential hopeful explained why Niebuhr was "one of my favorite philosophers."¹⁰² Obama told Brooks:

I take away [from Niebuhr] . . . the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away . . . the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.¹⁰³

Niebuhr's warnings about American exceptionalism were particularly relevant at that moment when the failures of U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan were beginning to become clear (see photo 6). But these warnings are also relevant to the future.

Exceptionalism and the National Interest

American exceptionalism of the kind Niebuhr depicted was strong throughout most of his life, and although it was damaged by the Vietnam War, it only became more prevalent after the Cold War era when the "End of History" seemed to dawn upon the world, leaving the country at its apex.¹⁰⁴ There are no strict Calvinists living within the Beltway today (that I have met), and



Photo 6: A member of the U.S. Marine Corps at a school in Afghanistan's Helmand Province in 2009. Niebuhr was an early critic of U.S. escalation in Vietnam and almost certainly would have been skeptical about recent U.S. nation-building efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Department of Defense photo by Staff Sergeant William Greeson, U.S. Marine Corps/Released)

few foreign policy experts would now consciously subscribe to the idea that the United States is morally and spiritually pure. U.S. enthusiasm for Wilsonian projects has evolved from belief in the League of Nations into a generalized faith in the power of global multilateralism. An age of diminished economic expectations has meanwhile exposed the domestic power relations that Niebuhr thought had been obscured and eased by the country's nineteenth-century opulence. This exposure manifested most recently, but not only, in the nationwide protests against police brutality in the spring and summer of 2020. Nevertheless, American exceptionalism is deeply rooted, and it will complicate the United States' ability to play the role it seeks in the world, impede its efforts to gain influence, and intensify its conflict with China.

Americans' belief that liberal democracy is the most advanced and universally valid form of government is not necessarily wrong, but this does not make the belief less problematic from a foreign policy perspective for all the reasons Niebuhr explained in *The Irony of American History*. Niebuhr thought it was fortunate that Americans have historically tended to view the innate attractiveness of their country as sufficient to encourage the development of democratic political systems elsewhere in the world. American exceptionalism, he explained, had the upside of largely obviating the need for military measures to enlarge the sphere of democracies: "Only occasionally does an hysterical statesman suggest that we must increase our power and use it in order to gain the ideal ends, of which providence has made us the trustees."¹⁰⁵ Or at least that was how it seemed when Niebuhr penned these lines in the early years of the Cold War. Since then, Americans have been living through an era in which the number of "hysterical statesmen" seeking to use force to remake the world in the United States' image has multiplied.

The United States is still too often myopic about the attractiveness of American values in a pluralistic world, and this tendency impedes U.S. efforts to win over other societies. This will weaken the United States' ability to push back against Chinese power in some parts of the world, especially when the inherent weaknesses of the U.S. political system are so

Americans should not be surprised that the claims of competence and material gain sometimes supersede U.S. versions of emancipation through political freedom.

regularly and vividly on display. Americans struggle, for example, to accept that the Chinese Communist Party's claim to greater efficiency and competence in governance may be attractive in some societies, even if it comes at the cost of democratic values that Americans revere. From Niebuhr's perspective, Americans should not be surprised that the claims of competence and material gain sometimes supersede U.S. versions of emancipation through political freedom. Niebuhr's anti-Communism did not blind him to the validity of the suffering to which the Communist creed responded. But it can be very hard for Americans to see that such claims can have a universal appeal of their own.

American exceptionalism also poses risks to U.S. efforts to generate prestige and legitimacy. Members of other societies often see more clearly than their U.S. counterparts that Americans' views of universal

values are shaped by the unique culture of the United States, and those who live beyond U.S. borders inevitably recognize how easily the United States overlooks the supposed universality of its values when dealing with countries that do not share them, such as Saudi Arabia. In practice, the United States tolerates the political systems of nondemocratic countries that serve other U.S. interests, while also singling out for criticism the domestic political structures of countries with whom Washington has conflicts of interest and geopolitical rivalries. This does not mean that the normative attacks on authoritarian governments are wholly wrong, only that the inconsistencies between U.S. positions fool very few outside the confines of the U.S. foreign policy establishment itself. The self-interested nature of U.S. policy in such cases can only lead to global skepticism about Washington's true intentions when it trumpets its values in other cases.

A further problem arises when countries may share U.S. ideals but be historically ill-positioned to attain them. Niebuhr thought that democracy requires a high level of pre-existing social cohesion if the differences it exposes are not to rend the society apart.¹⁰⁶ Democracy was possible in the United States because of its fortunate geographic and economic circumstances. But for other countries, democracy may be a luxury, according to Niebuhr—a view that resembles that of the eighteenth-century French intellectual Montesquieu.¹⁰⁷ Insisting that societies with weak economies, institutions, and social capital—or worse, those torn apart by war—adopt the political designs of a country as blessed as the United States is not only apt to be a fruitless venture, in other words, but is also apt to frustrate all sides. Washington's push to see American values reflected in the political systems of Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria no doubt did much to undermine U.S. prestige, perhaps even among other countries that share those values.

A Niebuhrian approach to the United States' role in the world today would thus be cautious about pushing values to center stage. Doing so carries the risk that others will come to view U.S. political values as only vehicles for promoting Washington's self-serving interests, or worse yet, a veiled threat. A rigid insistence that other societies adhere to these values also creates a zero-sum atmosphere in which recognition of the mutuality of interests that the United States shares with its adversaries becomes nearly impossible.

The Conflation of U.S. Values and Interests

This obviously does not mean that protecting the United States' own democracy shouldn't be a core objective of U.S. foreign policy, only that democracy promotion can be risky as a method of advancing U.S. interests overseas. Niebuhr would have been wary of saying, as President Joe Biden did on the eve of his first tour abroad in June 2021, that U.S. values “cannot [be] separate[d] from [U.S.] interests.”¹⁰⁸ The statement may be true, but not in the way that many readers around the world will interpret it, especially given the United States' recent history of promoting democracy at the point of a sword. American political values must obviously inform U.S. interests, but that does not necessarily make the promotion of American political values a U.S. interest.

Taking pride in American civilization and values but remaining cautious about applying these to other societies should not be difficult for an immigrant society where multiculturalism is widespread and growing, a society where the coexistence of differing cultural perspectives is taken as a virtue. Niebuhr recognized this already in the 1950s, exhorting the United States not to change its “domestic tolerance into self-righteous attitudes in international affairs.”¹⁰⁹

Unfortunately, the difficulty in distinguishing between particular U.S. cultural preferences and what may be truly universal values only becomes more difficult in light of the weaknesses in the U.S. democratic fabric at home. Stresses and strains on U.S. democracy should encourage greater humility about the United States’ role in the world, but insofar as these strains create anxiety about the durability of the U.S. political system, they do the opposite, impelling Washington to push harder to remake the world in its own image, to push back against authoritarians like Russian President Vladimir Putin, to root out their influence in U.S. society, and to thrust values to the center of U.S. foreign policy. Often these values come in the form of more progressive preferences of left-leaning Americans, preferences that even liberal, democracy-supporting U.S. partners in authoritarian countries like Russia do not share.¹¹⁰

One need not accept the implicit teleology of a Confucian vision of international order to recognize that U.S. efforts to push back against a Chinese world order are highly self-interested, however much U.S. leaders may attempt to couch them in a broader contest between liberal democracy and authoritarianism. In the face of China’s preferred alternative, the United States’ vision of what is a universally good global order is inevitably colored by its own self-interest and national anxiety about declining U.S. prestige. It makes sense to seek a rules-based international order, but there is more than one such order and the particular U.S.-preferred version of that order will inevitably grate against the Chinese version, as China’s leaders seek, at a minimum, an order in which the rules are more conducive to their interests (and surging national pride). The values approach also creates a zero-sum competition for global hegemony, an approach bound to generate massive anxiety on both sides. Meanwhile, a foreign policy posture based on American values will do little to change the selfish interests of U.S. allies and partners around the world, who may endorse the rhetoric when it suits their interests but will also shirk responsibility when it does not. An uneven application of U.S. concerns about values around the world will, meanwhile, offer them a ready excuse to do so.

To say that the United States should not conflate its own values with its interests does not mean that U.S. foreign policy should ignore the broader moral context in which the country operates or fail to incorporate an appreciation of that context into its foreign policy. A successful policy of self-restraint must be based on more than a reading of U.S. self-interest alone. When U.S. military strikes accidentally kill innocent civilians, they have negative implications for U.S. power. The international order that the United States aims to establish will have a moral foundation, one that must be compatible with liberal democracy but not coterminous with it.

Niebuhr's critique of American exceptionalism can also be flipped on its head and pointed at other countries, including the United States' principal adversaries. By giving culture and ideology such a central role, Niebuhr probably puts too much emphasis on it. Ideologies are not everything, and the cultural interpretation of foreign policy can risk devolving into essentialism. Nevertheless, understanding how ideologies involve explicit or implicit teleologies and create blind spots among U.S. adversaries is valuable. Americans should pay attention to the ways in which culture and ideology shape the foreign behavior of China, Russia, and other aspirants to global power, who will also struggle in the face of the imperfections of their own ideological frameworks. The ideology of the Chinese Communist Party probably plays a lesser role in shaping the broader culture of Chinese foreign policy than was the case for the Soviets, but the culture and ideology of the party must on some level shape its understanding of China's role in the world, its relations with the United States, and the character of the competition that has emerged between the two countries.

Implications for U.S. Global Leadership

The irony of the United States' role in the world today is perhaps that, while proponents of liberal hegemony rightly point to the positive structuring role that U.S. power played in the second half of the twentieth century, they consistently underestimate the ways in which U.S. power can undermine itself. Advocacy for an assertive U.S. role in the world too often also hides a chest-thumping national chauvinism that ignores deep global changes that lie far beyond Washington's control. This can be true even when the country's will to power is couched in the language of globalist multilateralism. U.S. nationalism is alive and well in both political parties when it comes to foreign policy. Niebuhr would have thought this completely normal, and not uniquely a negative phenomenon, but he would probably have sought to remind Americans that nationalism becomes dangerous when citizens fail to recognize the influence of their own will to power in policy formation by believing too strongly in their own exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism can also obscure a basic complexity of global politics. Viewed through the lens of Niebuhr's realism, the divergent perspectives created by unique national histories incessantly complicate international problems of cooperation and intensify conflicts. When it denies the durability of such differences, American exceptionalism oversimplifies these challenges. If U.S. principles of liberalism are universal, problems created by cultural and historical divergences might be expected to melt away. During the Cold War, this perspective was tenable perhaps because it was possible to segment (imperfectly) the world into what could be deemed a free sphere and an unfree sphere. The world is no longer segmented in this way. The United States must now interact and coexist peacefully with states with whom it has grown interdependent in many ways but who do not share a common historical perspective or set of political values.

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The simplifying value of American exceptionalism is lost in this context. The altered prospects for a universal foreign policy, in other words, also implies a change in the United States' role in the world, whether Washington likes it or not.

This does not mean that the United States cannot play a leadership role in the world, but it does change the nature of that role. U.S. power will remain outsized in relation to that of nearly every other country for decades to come. Washington can shape the agenda for international cooperation needed to preserve global public goods. It can use its prestige and power to foster guardrails that will reduce the chances of a calamitous major war. U.S. leadership will still be needed in these and other areas. Nonetheless, the context has changed, and the difference between this kind of leadership and U.S. leadership of the West during the Cold War is probably greater than most U.S. foreign policy elites recognize. This is true not least because such leadership requires an acknowledgment of the historical legitimacy of other political systems (sometimes even when they seem morally reprehensible to Americans and even when the states that embody those systems challenge U.S. power). Moreover, this form of leadership entails accepting that international competition is not resolvable and therefore must at best be perpetually managed, a recognition that does not fit well with the United States' can-do spirit, as Niebuhr noted.

Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq

Toward the end of his life, Niebuhr also wrote about Vietnam. Most Americans today are familiar with the basic history: In the 1950s, the United States inherited the role France was playing against the Communist insurgency under Ho Chi Minh. Then president Dwight D. Eisenhower provided financial support to the French effort, president John F. Kennedy added U.S. advisers in the early 1960s, and president Lyndon B. Johnson—frustrated with the resilience of the North Vietnamese forces—increased troop levels and escalated U.S. strikes to force Hanoi to capitulate.

Contemporaneous events unfolding in Algeria, where France faced a mounting insurgency, may be less familiar to U.S. readers: For more than a decade after World War II, France struggled to retain control of its North African colony. When domestic French politics conspired with international pressure to overturn France's rudderless Fourth Republic and usher in the Fifth Republic under the leadership of wartime hero General Charles de Gaulle, many people expected the general to pursue a harsh counterinsurgency policy in Algeria. But instead de Gaulle did the opposite, negotiating Algeria's independence from France and ending the war.

The decision by the old imperial power to cut loose one of its most prized colonies was a sharp contrast to the escalation pursued by the United States, an avowed anti-imperial power. This contrast greatly interested Niebuhr. Interviewed in the *New Republic* in January 1966, before U.S. public opinion had swung strongly against the Vietnam War, he ran

through the many contradictions in the U.S. policy and its course. Washington had convinced itself that it was preserving the Vietnamese people's right of self-determination, but U.S. leaders failed to understand that Ho, though a Communist, also represented the nationalist desires of many Vietnamese people. In the name of defeating Ho, the United States then carried out "military actions that spelled physical ruin for a nation which we are claiming to defend."¹¹¹ This was hardly a tenable position, but Washington could not escape because its prestige had become so closely entwined with the fate of this tiny nation, whose democratic government was a caricature of corruption that made excellent fodder for the Communist propaganda machine.

France managed to overcome its parallel problem in Algeria only by deploying a leader who himself embodied an extraordinary level of prestige for the French people (see photo 7). As of 1966, such an individual was not available in Washington and so a negotiated peace was unlikely, Niebuhr thought, as he predicted that the U.S. strategy he characterized as seeking honorable peace through bombing would be a wrecking ball to U.S. claims to moral superiority over the Soviets.

It is hardly original to draw parallels between the war in Vietnam and U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, but Niebuhr's critique of U.S. policy in Vietnam holds some important insights for both experiences and was especially trenchant in the late summer of 2021 as the Taliban advanced rapidly across Afghanistan and into Kabul in the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal. The Taliban's rapid recapture of the Afghan capital displayed in stark relief the paradox of the awesomeness of U.S. military power, which turned out to be the essential glue of the Afghan state, yet also this power's very limited ability to effect lasting change in the face of cultural forces determined to resist it.

Niebuhr might have smiled a little at the irony. U.S. moral pride and prestige again came under fire, so much so that many figures in the foreign policy establishment preferred to persist in a futile war rather than accept the ugly reality of defeat. But it was not only defeat and damaged pride that created this unease in Washington. On a deeper level, the collapse of the Afghan forces confronted U.S. elites with a more problematic Niebuhrian irony: Americans' idealistic plans for the world may ultimately rely on the violent coercive force of the U.S. military (see photo 8). This means that years of promoting women's rights in Afghanistan



Photo 7: U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson and French President Charles de Gaulle meeting in 1963. In the 1960s, Niebuhr became critical of U.S. policy on Vietnam, which he contrasted with French policy on Algeria. (Credit: Bettmann/Getty Images)



Photo 8: U.S. Marines and allied forces assisting with the evacuation from Kabul, Afghanistan, in August 2021. This sobering event underscored the fundamental Niebuhrian irony that American idealism is often unwittingly predicated upon the country's extraordinary capacity for violent coercion. (Department of Defense photo by Staff Sergeant Victor Mancilla/Released)

was only possible because the United States was willing and able to kill Afghan. This reality is no doubt more than Washington will be prepared to accept. Some degree of American exceptionalism will remain the norm.

The Application of U.S. Power in a Changing World

One of the most important roles for the United States in the world, from Niebuhr's perspective, is to work toward the peaceful management of global change. Niebuhr spelled this out most clearly in his later work, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*. He did not rule out the use of force as a means of coercion in international affairs, but clearly (like most sane people) he ultimately preferred the path of nonviolence. This view implies a heavy emphasis on diplomacy, even if coercive diplomacy is sometimes required. It also implies patience and the willingness to accommodate the interests of other states over time as circumstances dictate. From Niebuhr's interwar perspective, the need to accommodate the competing interests of states so as to avoid another calamitous war seemed self-evident. In this sense, he took the opposite lessons of many Americans, who viewed the whole interwar experience through the appeasement policy pursued by the French and British in Munich in 1938. Niebuhr also lamented Munich, but his view was broader and incorporated a recognition of the damage done by France's intransigent approach to Germany after World War I, an approach that weakened German democracy and increased German vulnerability to Nazism.

Writing in the 1950s, Niebuhr thought the best hope for preventing the Cold War from turning hot was a gradual adjustment of interests over time through a long and drawn-out process of bargaining. He hoped a period of gradual adjustment would allow statesmen to see their broader interests and perspectives and reduce the pressure to act precipitously in the narrow national interest. The greatest risk of war occurred when states with conflicting interests were suddenly forced "to make a choice" about their security and interests.¹¹² In these circumstances, statesmen tend to react with the most narrow and selfish perspectives

Niebuhr thus saw the optimal strategy as one in which nations were provided the space to gradually adjust to prevailing conditions and realities.

possible on their national interests. A crisis can thus easily provoke an escalation to war that neither side initially seeks. The risk of precipitous action is compounded by the tendency of countries to view their actions and military posture less negatively than their adversaries do: During the Cold War, for instance, the United States was only dimly aware of the extent to which the many pressures upon the Soviet Union might lead Moscow to fear a preemptive U.S. attack.

In Niebuhr's mind, the best hope of reducing such pressure so that the interests of competing states could gradually be adjusted was to lengthen timelines. This would increase the chances that states would come to recognize the "mutuality" of shared interests—above all in terms of avoiding war. For the United States and the Soviet Union, the essential mutuality of their relationship was the threat of nuclear Armageddon. Niebuhr thus saw the optimal strategy as one in which


nations were provided the space to gradually adjust to prevailing conditions and realities. It might be easier “to cool off the animosities of the Cold War than to agree on nuclear disarmament,” he wrote.¹¹³

It may be more difficult than modern observers tend to recognize for the United States and China to achieve a similar slowdown. The existential threat of nuclear catastrophe does not present as compelling a case for the mutuality of interest shared by the Soviets and Americans during the Cold War, but the threat that war between the United States and China would present to the global economy might offer an analogue. So does the peril of a global environmental catastrophe toward which the world increasingly seems to hurtle. These threats may be slightly less terrifying than nuclear Armageddon, but they could still be existential for all concerned parties. Regarding war, China might seek a form of economic self-sufficiency that would allow it to more credibly threaten war against the United States, but it probably would struggle to achieve a level of autarky that would cut it off from all international economic risk in a conflict. At the same time, both sides’ efforts to acquire military advantages that would make them perceive such a war as winnable—including cyber or space capabilities that would render adversaries politically or technologically impotent—work against this mutuality. Such twenty-first-century analogues to the Schlieffen Plan that helped precipitate World War I are the equivalent for mutuality and stability of eliminating second-strike capabilities during the Cold War. Niebuhr would think that these efforts are to be expected, but that they pose serious dangers.

Niebuhr’s Legacy

It would be easy to see in Niebuhr an overly negative view of the United States that is blind to its virtues. Niebuhr’s writings are not the stuff that would make for a popular political campaign in any country. He is too focused on the problem of original sin. He challenges many long-standing beliefs of conservative U.S. nationalists and liberal U.S. idealists alike. Perhaps most of all, his writings offer frustratingly little practical advice for policymakers struggling to prioritize a vast array of challenges in a world that he himself recognized as almost impossibly complex, and whose complexity has only increased since he wrote. If one accepts his basic skepticism about the United States’ capacity for positive action, the temptation toward isolationism or other forms of national chauvinism will always be there. This is, of course, the very temptation he sought to warn Americans against.

But Niebuhr’s critiques demonstrate one of the greatest strengths of the U.S. political system, one that he himself appreciated. It is impossible not to read his take on the United States’ view of the world without reflecting on the fact that he himself was an American and without marveling at the culture in which one so critical can rise to such prominence. He was a son of immigrants who rose to become a force for justice in U.S. society and



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won accolades from conservatives as well as his fellow progressives. Contemporary critics of the United States often seem to have the interests of a particular social group or business behind them; Niebuhr had none of these, yet he was widely published, read, and recognized as a foremost philosopher and theologian. A culture in which this intellectual diversity is possible—and in which sharp critiques are permitted—is no doubt the best antidote for the blind spots that any society is bound to experience. From this perspective, perhaps, the final irony of Niebuhr's work is that its trenchant critique of U.S. culture is also evidence of one of its greatest virtues. He recognized this virtue in liberal democracy, although he would not have put himself at the center of the story.

The breadth of his intellect made Niebuhr a fox rather than a hedgehog in Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction.¹¹⁴ But he was still a figure with an important central message for his country. Crucial in his day, this message is no less so in today's noisy, Twitter-fueled, twenty-first-century state of mind. That message is Augustinian: the United States is fated to commit injustice at home and abroad; it must strive to do better but can never truly succeed. This is a frustrating message and perhaps an un-American one. Many will reject it in favor of the pursuit of raw interest or pointless idealism. For Niebuhr, these are just ways of attempting to escape the human condition. Those who embrace them do so at their own risk. Ultimately, if Niebuhr's dual imperatives appear to brook no resolution, perhaps this is not because there is not one. Perhaps it is because, as humans, we do not see it.

About the Author

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