
‘Serenity’ in an Uncertain Age: Reinhold Niebuhr and America’s Quest for Responsible Atomic Hegemony

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Abstract. *The American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr stands as one of the most important public intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century. A prolific thinker and writer, Niebuhr’s interests ranged far beyond religion. His worldview, encapsulated in the well-known “Serenity Prayer,” framed the conversation of a generation of American diplomats, intellectuals, and politicians concerned with shaping the actions of the most powerful nation on earth. Combining America’s foundational promise with a hard dose of realism, Niebuhr managed to reconcile political ethics with practicable foreign policy. Niebuhr humanized the atomic age by refocusing American opinion leaders on Christian principles, defending his country’s democratic system while offering a much-needed corrective to the dominant religious and political currents of his day.*

Niebuhr’s thinking significantly influenced the debate surrounding America’s foreign policy throughout the early Cold War, particularly concerning the ethics of the atomic bomb. The creation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), with the power to literally end human existence, made statecraft a matter of life and death for every human being on the planet and gave Niebuhr’s conclusions about the justice of war a previously unthinkable poignancy. This article explores Niebuhr’s intellectual journey from pacifism to acceptance of the use of force, including atomic weapons, detailing his thoughtful appraisal of America’s role in the world, as well as prescient warnings of the dual dangers of pride and inaction.

Keywords: *Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian realism, atomic weapons, anticommunism, political ethics*

At precisely 8:15 on the morning of August 6, 1945, the residents of Hiroshima, Japan, awoke to a blinding flash. This massive explosion out of a quiet, clear blue sky was not the result of a huge bombing raid like the one that had virtually obliterated Tokyo on the night of March 6–7 that year; it was the product of a single bomb that would change

warfare and international relations forever.¹ This device, created and deployed by the United States, would sear itself indelibly into the human psyche as surely as the tens of thousands it had obliterated that morning in Hiroshima.

In a scene reminiscent of the Biblical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the US had harnessed the elemental energy of nature to annihilate enemy civilians on a scale previously unimaginable, seizing for itself a power once thought the sole preserve of God. In a single stroke, America had introduced the world to weapons of mass destruction² – and with them, the heart-wrenching moral and ethical dilemmas of a new age of atomic terror.

Bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed diametrically opposed to the religious and civil bastions of American identity: liberal democracy imbued with a redemptive mission in the spirit of Christianity.³ Nuclear weapons created a vexing new question: how could the US square the wholesale slaughter of innocents in Hiroshima with its essential, messianic vision of itself as the savior of a sinful world, the “last, best hope of earth”?⁴ If the US were to navigate the treacherous challenges of the atomic age (challenges it had created for itself and the rest of the world), it would somehow need to harmonize its newfound God-like power to destroy with its long-held core values. Such an exercise was not merely academic; the assault on Hiroshima demonstrated to intellectuals and policymakers the need for serious reexamination of America’s collective soul. If the debate over the use of atomic weapons to end World War II⁵ – a war in which most could draw a clear distinction between the “good” US and “evil” Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan – was contentious, their efficacy in the emerging Cold War proved even more controversial.

Into this frighteningly uncertain time stepped a theologian and public intellectual who could reconcile the paradoxical questions of twentieth century warfare and statecraft. Walking the tightrope between Cold War *Weltschmerz* and nuclear

¹ Michihiko Hachiya, *Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6–September 30, 1945*, trans. and ed. Warner Wells (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 1–6.

² Although other highly destructive munitions, such as poison gas (which is usually classified today under the “umbrella” of WMD) existed before the atomic bomb, their use had almost always been restricted to the battlefield. World War II saw the first mass (or “obliteration”) bombing intentionally directed at enemy civilian populations. See Chapter 3 of Joel H. Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists: Political Realism, Responsible Power, and American Culture in the Nuclear Age* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 66–120.

³ See especially Chapter II, “America as a Chosen People,” in Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1971), 36–60.

⁴ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Annual Message,” (December 1, 1862), *The American Presidency Project*, accessed February 22, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=29503>.

⁵ President Harry Truman, the man ultimately responsible for the decision to drop the atomic bombs, privately expressed “a strong thread of ambivalence and even horror” about the human cost of the attacks. Nevertheless, he publically maintained his decision was justified by Japan’s staunch refusal to surrender and the prospect of 100,000 Allied casualties should an invasion of the Japanese home islands prove necessary. See Chapter 45, “The Most Terrible Bomb, the Most Terrible Thing,” in Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 562–70.

bellicosity, Reinhold Niebuhr offered an ironic understanding of human nature that paved the way for a measured, sane approach to foreign policy. Niebuhr fell somewhere between the handwringing of Christian pacifists and the bombast of fundamentalist advocates of all-out international confrontation; his theology and ethics would inspire a generation of leaders who prevented both communism's triumph and an atomic Armageddon.

Niebuhr's "principled, hard-headed approach to war and peace" became a mainstay of political and foreign policy thinkers in the years immediately following the Second World War.⁶ International theorist Hans Morgenthau and historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. both cited him as a major influence on their thinking.⁷ Diplomat George Kennan (referring to Cold War realists) called Niebuhr "the father of us all."⁸ The basis of Christian realism, however, was evident long before the beginning of the epochal struggle between East and West.⁹

During the darkest days of World War II, Niebuhr penned, "God, give me grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other."¹⁰ This simple entreaty, the *Serenity Prayer*, encapsulates the fundamental wisdom of his thinking about America, humanity, and the world. In a single sentence, the self-styled "academic 'circuit rider'" presented not just a prayer but a whole worldview, a lens through which to view, and a tool with which to tackle, the thorniest problems of twentieth century *Realpolitik*.¹¹ The prayer illustrates Niebuhr's essential assumptions: humans are left to make sense of the world for themselves, striving to do good without the certainty that God is on their side. Rather than laboring, Puritan-like, toward a

⁶ Paul Elie, "A Man for All Reasons," *The Atlantic*, November 2007, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/11/a-man-for-all-reasons/306337/1/>.

⁷ Daniel F. Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9–11. Morgenthau was a leading international relations scholar from the 1950s to 1970s and advisor to the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations who ultimately left government over his disagreement with America's policy in Vietnam. Schlesinger was an historian and advisor to the Kennedy White House whose "Vital Center liberalism" sought to chart a course between acquiescence to the spread of communism and all-out war.

⁸ George F. Kennan, "Tribute to the Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr," Box 49, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress.

⁹ Niebuhr is by far the best-known "Christian realist," and arguably the most influential. However, the framework of Christian realism was not his sole creation, arising from among social-liberal and socialist Protestants disturbed by the political milieu of the late 1930s. See Chapter 3 of David A. Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2013), 56–81.

¹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Serenity Prayer*, 1943, quoted in Elisabeth Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer: Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 7. Though sometimes attributed to thinkers such as St. Francis of Assisi or Friedrich Christoph Oetinger, the *Serenity Prayer* was written by Reinhold Niebuhr sometime during World War II, most likely in 1943. Niebuhr did not publish the prayer until 1951, but used it in his sermons much earlier. The prayer occurs throughout his collected papers, but is rarely dated.

¹¹ John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 11.

utopian kingdom of God on earth, they should instead work toward limited but realistic goals, trying to “arrang[e] some kind of armistice between competing factions and forces.”¹² Niebuhr recognized that, in the complex twentieth century world, easy distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, were too often elusive.

Niebuhr’s capacity for paradox, his ability to understand and tolerate human imperfection, made him uniquely able to make sense of the hard realities of his time. His belief “that humanity is afflicted with excessive pride and a self-preoccupation that distorts moral judgment” grew from a theology of crisis into a philosophy of political thought.¹³ His affirmation of the doctrine of original sin — the conception of evil as something tragically, inescapably part of human nature — gave him a healthy skepticism of vainglory, whether from demagogues or liberals.

As if the sins and shortcomings of humanity were not enough, atomic weapons added a new urgency to Niebuhr’s pragmatic worldview. By the mid-1950s, the US was engaged in a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. War would not only mean devastation and enormous casualties, but possibly the extinction of all life on earth. If America’s leaders wished to avoid repeating the horror of Hiroshima a thousand times over without surrendering their country’s values, they would have to find a way to navigate the treacherous waters of the atomic age.

As the iconic *Serenity Prayer* illustrates, Niebuhr never forgot the giant weight of this responsibility. His wisdom — the “compromise between the rigor of the ideal and the necessities of the day” — was the ability to retain the moral framework of Christianity while allowing policymakers the tools to achieve tangible political results.¹⁴ This fundamentally American dichotomy shaped the nation’s Cold War posture and the response of its leaders to some of the greatest challenges of the century.

FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH POLITICAL ETHICS:

“The richest character is achieved when various, seemingly incompatible, tendencies and functions are fused in one personality.”¹⁵

As World War I unfolded in Europe, the raw material of Reinhold Niebuhr’s political thought was forged in the foundries of industrial Detroit. As pastor of the Bethel Evangelical Church, the neophyte preacher grew dismayed at what he saw as the “old, cocksure orthodoxy” of the German-American ministry, “intolerant because it is so sure

¹² Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 39.

¹³ Richard Crouter, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, Religion, and Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 41.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1980), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 150.

that it alone is right.”¹⁶ This “unfraternal spirit,” a combination of insular attitudes and disregard for the plight of the working poor, pervaded the churches in the manufacturing city. German-American Christians’ “indifference” toward the economically disadvantaged in America “in spite of the fact that [they come] from a country that has been a clinic for the world in the methods of humanizing industry,” prompted Niebuhr to excoriate that entire “hyphenated” community in an article written for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1916, his first foray into the social and political realm in which he later became so famous.¹⁷

Niebuhr’s time in Detroit, even among his mostly bourgeois congregation, certainly reinforced his leftist political and economic sensibilities. He called it a “pagan city” where “naïve gentlemen with a genius for mechanics [have] suddenly become arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands.”¹⁸ Niebuhr contrasted the city’s gloriously wealthy captains of industry with the unskilled workers who labored day and night in factories, where “manual labor is a drudgery and toil is slavery. The men cannot possibly find any satisfaction in their work... Their sweat and their dull pain are part of the price paid for the fine cars we all run.”¹⁹

In addition to his commitment to social justice for the economically disadvantaged, Niebuhr’s feelings about the First World War echoed those of many Progressives.²⁰ He enthusiastically supported Woodrow Wilson’s aims to use war as a noble quest to make “the world safe for democracy.”²¹ Wilson believed American victory could usher in a new, peaceful world order, in which the horror of war would be only a distant memory.²² To Niebuhr, these idealistic goals, combined with the fact that the US had remained on the sidelines for almost three years as the conflict raged in Europe, justified military intervention as a righteous crusade.²³

Wilson’s starry-eyed optimism, however, was soon dashed against the hard realities of the Paris Peace Conference, where his high ideals met a chilly reception from British and French delegations. When the President failed to secure his goals, Niebuhr lamented, “Wilson is a typical son of the manse. He believes too much in words.” Like many American idealists, he felt his country’s divine mission had been corrupted by

¹⁶ Niebuhr, “The Problem of German-Americanism,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1916.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 123, 136.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁰ Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012), 259–63.

²¹ Woodrow Wilson, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress Requesting a Declaration of War Against Germany, April 2, 1917,” *The American Presidency Project*, accessed April 7, 2013, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=65366&st=&st1=>.

²² Lloyd E. Ambrosius, *Wilsonianism: Woodrow Wilson and His Legacy in American Foreign Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 52.

²³ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 259–63.

Old World power politics, embodied by “the sly Clemenceau,” who “sneaks new meanings into [Wilson’s] nice words.”²⁴

Jaded by the “victors’ peace” reached at Versailles, Niebuhr renounced his pro-war stance and embraced a gloomy, world-weary pacifism.²⁵ He had not lost his commitment to Progressive principles, noting that “realities are always defeating ideals, but ideals have a way of taking revenge upon the facts which momentarily imprison them.”²⁶ Rather than jettisoning Wilsonian goals, Niebuhr abandoned his support for Wilson’s methods. Without a clear way forward, he and many others became convinced of the futility of naïve foreign adventures, and gradually came to reject war under any circumstances.²⁷ As liberal Progressives shifted focus to issues of domestic social justice after the disappointment of 1919, Niebuhr’s first flirtation with “just war” came to an inauspicious end.²⁸

Disillusioned, Niebuhr mirrored many of his Progressive counterparts and turned inward – in his case, back to the economic inequity of early 1920s Detroit.²⁹ In the immediate post-war years, the burgeoning auto industry attracted huge numbers of foreign immigrants, including many Germans, who left their own impoverished country in search of a share in “*das amerikanische Wirtschaftswunder*” (“the American economic miracle”). These immigrants joined the teeming multitudes in Henry Ford’s giant factories; many also found their way to churches like Bethel.³⁰

In addition to class struggles, Niebuhr’s years in Detroit were punctuated by growing disapproval of American capitalism and liberal naïveté. Niebuhr, who once considered Henry Ford a pious (if somewhat deluded) do-gooder, now vilified him and his “welfare capitalism” as thinly veiled exploitation.³¹ Calling Ford’s labor policies “perilous to civilization” and frustrated by the “standpat complacency” of unions like the American Federation of Labor, Niebuhr moved further away from mainstream liberalism and into the realm of socialism, in deed if not yet in name.³²

Ironically, as Niebuhr became more intellectually embroiled in the struggles of American labor throughout the 1920s, his move towards radical politics hinted at a more

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 24.

²⁵ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 57–60.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 24.

²⁷ Indeed, the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, approved overwhelmingly in the US Senate, legally outlawed war as a means of settling international disputes. Non-interventionism was a mainstay of US intellectual and public opinion during the interwar period.

²⁸ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 57–60.

²⁹ Notable among them Oswald Garrison Villard, publisher of *The Nation*, anti-imperialism activist, and supporter of the NAACP. See Chapter 8, “Victory without Peace, 1918–1919” in Michael Wreszin, *Oswald Garrison Villard: A Pacifist at War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1965).

³⁰ Alan Dawley, *Changing the World: American Progressives in War and Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 308.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 94–99.

³² *Ibid.*

important trend in his ethical thinking: the limited justification of violence. Though Niebuhr still considered himself an anti-war activist in the tradition of worldwide socialist solidarity, he conceded that in cases of labor versus management, "nonresistance and nonviolence were in fact noneffective."³³ In a fallen world, humans had to contend with proximate evils with all the means at their disposal. Though this idea had yet to translate fully into the realm of international relations, the basis of Niebuhr's wartime ethics is evident in his thoughts about the struggle against titans of industry to achieve social equity for their workers.³⁴

Social justice, for Niebuhr, was becoming as elusive as a satisfying career. Always ambivalent about his post at Bethel, Niebuhr longed for an academic position that would give him the opportunity to reach a national audience. In 1928, he left Detroit for a part-time teaching position at New York City's Union Theological Seminary, and the editorship of the *World Tomorrow*, a Christian pacifist magazine.³⁵ He would remain at Union for the rest of his professional career, and the people and ideas he encountered there would shape his philosophy from a nebulous, quasi-socialist exposition of American life into a singular doctrine of political ethics applied on a world scale.

EMBRACING INTERVENTION:

"It may be necessary at times to sacrifice a degree of moral purity for political effectiveness."³⁶

Niebuhr's insistence on the necessity of democracy featured prominently in his political thinking, both in terms of domestic and foreign policy. Within the US, Niebuhr's involvement in the struggle against economic injustice in Detroit, along with criticism of American consumerism at the national level, displayed his unyielding commitment to equality and concern for human wellbeing.³⁷ In addition to his Detroit activism, Niebuhr gradually drifted toward socialism as he became more and more convinced of the need to radically redistribute wealth to close the gap between rich and poor. His membership in the League for Independent Political Action (a socialist economic

³³ Preston, 305.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fox, 110.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 244.

³⁷ Even as late as 1958, when the emerging Civil Rights Movement had focused American national attention on race relations, Niebuhr still decried Protestant churches' lack of concrete action for equality: "the theater and the sports have done more for race amity, for understanding than, on the whole, the Protestant Church." (Reinhold Niebuhr, interview by Mike Wallace, *The Mike Wallace Interview*, American Broadcasting Company, April 27, 1958, http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/multimedia/video/2008/wallace/niebuhr_reinhold_t.html).

organization) and the League for Industrial Democracy prefigured his eventual enrollment in the Socialist Party proper.³⁸ By 1931, Niebuhr and a small circle of colleagues had even founded the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, a group dedicated to organizing Christian support for the Socialist Party and its radical economic philosophy.³⁹

In terms of international affairs, Niebuhr had by the late 1930s established the basis of a theory of moral legitimacy for states informed by social-democratic ideals. His theory centered on the criteria of freedom and justice: first, countries must display “unity and solidarity of the community, sufficiently strong to allow the free play of competitive interests without endangering the community itself.”⁴⁰ Second, their constitutions or traditions should enshrine “a belief in the freedom of the individual and appreciation of his work,” and finally harness the power of government to create “a tolerable harmony and equilibrium of social and political and economic forces necessary to establish an approximation of social justice.”⁴¹

Although Niebuhr’s political and social ideals remained relatively consistent, the methods through which he sought to achieve them did not. His commitment to non-interventionism reflected a trend among liberal Progressives (like editor of *The Nation* Oswald Garrison Villard and pacifist clergymen A. J. Muste and Norman Thomas) who felt betrayed by the Versailles peace settlement.⁴² He believed pacifism was the only sure way to prevent another horrendous war, and joined organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation to advocate for the peaceful settlement of disputes.⁴³

By the mid-1930s, however, events in Europe and Asia forced Niebuhr to reconsider his worldview. He observed, “it is hardly necessary to draw the conclusion...that those who draw their inspiration from Christ’s Kingdom must limit themselves to purely moral weapons in contending against historic injustice.”⁴⁴ In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr held up Gandhi, not Christ, as a model of morality brought to bear on the political realities of the day: “Mr. Gandhi is really saying...that even violence is justified if it proceeds from perfect moral goodwill. But he is equally insistent that non-violence is usually the better method of expressing goodwill. He is probably right on both counts.”⁴⁵

Moral Man and Immoral Society marked a sea change in Niebuhr’s ethical and political thinking. In it, he renounced pacifism as the only morally justifiable method of

³⁸ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 115–17.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 128–29.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr and Paul E. Sigmund, *The Democratic Experience: Past and Prospects* (New York: Praeger, 1969), 73.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 241.

⁴³ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 155–56.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 285.

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 247.

enacting social change, casting off his idealist past and embracing a doctrine of political realism. Niebuhr's socialist and pacifist friends (particularly Norman Thomas) vilified him for his modified stance, but world events were fast discrediting their prescriptions for geopolitical stability and justice. Japan's 1931 invasion of Manchuria was met by a condemnation by the League of Nations but little effective action. Japan, returning to "power politics," in the most overt aggression since World War I, simply withdrew from the League and consolidated its bloody conquest of Northern China.⁴⁶

The crisis in East Asia not only prompted Niebuhr to resume his direct commentary on world affairs, but also pushed him into a direct (and public) debate with his brother Richard. In the March 23, 1932 issue of *Christian Century*, Richard Niebuhr argued in "The Grace of Doing Nothing" that the US should abstain from any intervention in the Sino-Japanese War; indeed, he wrote, "the problem we [Christians] face is...that of choice between various kinds of inactivity rather than of choice between action and inaction."⁴⁷ He succinctly concluded, "The inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good: it is the inaction of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness."⁴⁸ According to the younger Niebuhr, no form of foreign military involvement could be justified because of the inherent sinfulness of the US, a fallen nation morally equivalent to any other.

Taking his sibling to task, Reinhold Niebuhr responded in an essay published in *Christian Century* the very next week. "There will never be a wholly disinterested nation," he noted, claiming, "pure disinterestedness is an ideal which even individuals cannot fully achieve."⁴⁹ Niebuhr repudiated the Christian pacifism of his brother, calling the idealistic goals of liberal internationalists (that is, a utopian, "ethical goal for society by purely ethical means") "an illusion."⁵⁰

By the mid- to late-1930s, more and more world crises emerged similar to Japan's naked and unchallenged aggression. In 1935, Adolf Hitler announced that Germany would no longer abide by the terms of the Versailles Treaty, and a few months later Benito Mussolini invaded Ethiopia.⁵¹ The response of the great powers to this mounting adversity was either pious hand wringing or, in the case of the US, almost total inaction. Niebuhr no doubt viewed these developments with increasing anxiety. The liberal world order, imperfect as it was, was threatened by a building wave of totalitarian aggression—and none of those holding the institutional reins of power seemed prepared to respond.

⁴⁶ E. H. Carr, *International Relations Between the Two World Wars (1919–1939)* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 170–72.

⁴⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," in *War As Crucifixion: Essays on Peace, Violence, and 'Just War,'* ed. John M. Buchanan and David Heim (Chicago: Christian Century Press, 2002), 5–9, 8.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing?," in *War as Crucifixion*, 10–14, 11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹ Carr, *International Relations Between the Two World Wars*, 215–228.

In 1936, Niebuhr announced his support for Franklin Roosevelt a few days before the November election, and by 1938 he came to admire the President's enthusiasm for collective security and his preparation of the American people for war. Ominously, Niebuhr even began to refer to the Fascists as "the enemy," anticipating the coming conflict between democracy and totalitarianism.⁵²

Niebuhr's mounting fear of expansionist dictatorships manifested itself in the life of his friend and former student Dietrich Bonhoeffer. After Bonhoeffer helped found the anti-Nazi Confessing Church in Germany, he visited his old teacher in April 1939 with news of Germany's descent into a Nazi police state. Although he held a teaching position in America, Bonhoeffer resigned his post and returned home in July to be closer to his Synod.⁵³ With many friends being persecuted by Hitler's regime and some already in concentration camps, Bonhoeffer might even have resembled to Niebuhr a latter-day Daniel, returning calmly to the lions' den of Nazi Germany to face whatever fate awaited him.⁵⁴

By spring 1939, Niebuhr had left New York for Britain to deliver a series of lectures at Oxford and Edinburgh Universities.⁵⁵ He found war clouds looming menacingly over the island nation, as Europe seemed to unravel bit by bit during his time there. With the Italian invasion of Albania, and German annexation of the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia, and Austria already complete, Western governments seemed impotent to stem the tide. The shocking non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union on August 24 removed the last obstacle to full-scale war, which Britain finally declared on September 2, 1939 in response to the invasion of Poland.⁵⁶ When Niebuhr finished his lectures in November, bombs had already begun to fall on Britain's cities.

Fully awakened to the reality of war, Niebuhr returned to an America where public opinion still favored nonintervention by a wide margin.⁵⁷ Dismayed by the popular disconnect between Americans' desire to avoid foreign conflict and his hope to thwart totalitarian aggression, Niebuhr channeled his efforts into advocating for the Allied cause. He renounced his membership in the Socialist Party, which still clung to pacifism, and brought together like-minded thinkers and activists in several new organizations to make the pro-intervention message mainstream.⁵⁸

⁵² Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 177–85.

⁵³ Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906–1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance*, trans. Isabel Best (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 227–30.

⁵⁴ Once back in Germany, Bonhoeffer joined the resistance movement and conspired with members of the military intelligence service to kill Adolf Hitler. He was arrested in 1943 and murdered at the Flossenbürg Concentration Camp on April 9, 1945, just three weeks before the end of the war.

⁵⁵ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 187.

⁵⁶ Anthony P. Adamthwaite, *The Making of the Second World War* (Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 89–91, 225.

⁵⁷ Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *From Wilson to Roosevelt: Foreign Policy of the United States 1913–1945*, trans. Nancy Lyman Roelker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 237–38.

⁵⁸ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 194.

Taking aim at Christian pacifists, Niebuhr founded the staunchly pro-intervention *Christianity and Crisis* to mobilize support “in defense of democratic civilization.”⁵⁹ The periodical’s alliterative title was no coincidence; Niebuhr intended his new outlet as a direct challenge to the established pacifist journal *Christian Century*.⁶⁰ Along with a new publication, Niebuhr sought to unify support for the allied defense of democracy. To that end, he created the Union for Democratic Action (UDA), a “halfway house” for “former radicals in transit toward the liberalism of the Democratic Party.”⁶¹

Under the direction of Niebuhr and James Loeb, the UDA lobbied for increased aid to the embattled British (the US was not yet officially at war and strict neutrality laws prohibited the exportation of weapons to conflict zones) and more liberal immigration measures that would allow European Jews to escape persecution. Although committed to the fight against Nazism, Niebuhr and the UDA remained apprehensive of Soviet Communism. Recognizing the USSR as a totalitarian state not unlike Nazi Germany, the UDA barred members of the Communist Party USA (directed from the Kremlin by the early 1940s) from membership in its organization.⁶²

Many American Jews, conscious of Nazi atrocities, were more receptive to Niebuhr’s early interventionism than the general public. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, a longtime friend of Niebuhr, noted in December 1941, “too many liberals...are still enslaved by their romantic illusions, and cannot face your clean, surgeon-like exposition of reality.”⁶³ Frankfurter lamented “that any Jew should be worried about publishing” Niebuhr’s work on international relations. He also urged Niebuhr to distribute his work more widely, publishing in “a much wider, a much more influential, vehicle” such as *Harper’s* or *The Atlantic*.⁶⁴

By the time the US entered the Second World War in December 1941, Niebuhr had renounced both radicalism and pacifism in pursuit of an achievable, moral foreign policy—achievable because of its limited goals, and moral for its recognition that the US, with its vast power and resources, *could be* an effective agent for good. Shaking the nation’s Protestant churches out of their “simple Christian moralism,” he called for critical but decisive action to combat the dual menace of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan.⁶⁵ It was this contradictory identity, the ironic balance between America’s Puritanical roots and its newfound obligations, which would shape Niebuhr’s civic theology for the rest of his career, and come to influence America’s international posture in the postwar world.

⁵⁹ Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 311–12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 200.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Felix Frankfurter to Niebuhr (December 24, 1941), Box 6, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Raymond Haberski Jr., *God and War: American Civil Religion Since 1945* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 16–17.

CHRISTIAN REALISM COMES OF AGE:

“Love may qualify the social struggle of history but it will never abolish it, and those who make the attempt...will die on the cross.”⁶⁶

If any war could ever be called ‘just,’ World War II seemed so for most Americans. The US had been attacked by a foreign aggressor, and Americans were soon fighting from Morocco to Guadalcanal not just to restore the peace, but to win the freedom of all peoples. Indeed, President Franklin Roosevelt couched the war in such universalistic terms, comparing his vision for the world expressed in the 1941 Atlantic Charter to the Magna Carta and even the Ten Commandments.⁶⁷ Although some pacifists (like Norman Thomas, then presidential candidate for the Socialist Party USA⁶⁸) still decried Niebuhr’s support for Roosevelt and the war, for perhaps the first time Niebuhr’s political viewpoint reflected that of a majority of Americans. His repudiation of his antiwar past was complete.

After the US declaration of hostilities, Niebuhr worked to garner support for liberal war aims from Christian opinion leaders, even pacifists. At one notable conference of the Federal Council of Churches at Delaware, Ohio in March 1942, Niebuhr and like-minded thinkers were able to outline propositions for creating a “just and durable peace” after the war.⁶⁹ The conference, described by one historian as a “realist-pacifist summit meeting,” brought together ideologically disparate figures (including future Secretary of State John Foster Dulles) to identify broad “Christian principles” in relation to America’s recent entry into the war. Yet even after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Niebuhr’s faction faced fierce criticism from avowed pacifists who declared, “The Church as such is not at war.”⁷⁰

Despite his conviction that the US was fighting the “good fight,” Niebuhr’s support for America’s war effort was not unqualified. It was around this time that Niebuhr wrote arguably his most famous and enduring contribution to ethical thought, the “Serenity Prayer.” The prayer encapsulated Niebuhr’s troubled worldview—a plea for divine tranquility that would temper the vice of human pride.

Niebuhr’s prayer demonstrated, in a few short lines, the maturity of his philosophy of human nature and, by extension, proper political conduct. In an age where

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, “Must We Do Nothing?”, 14.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America’s Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 2005), 43.

⁶⁸ Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr and His Circle of Influence*, 101–5.

⁶⁹ Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire*, 57.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

technology allowed whole cities to be reduced to ruins within a single night,⁷¹ it hardly seemed the Allies could maintain adherence to principles of *jus in bello* even if they could rightly claim *jus ad bellum*.⁷² Instead, they seemed destined to strive mightily toward a moral end achieved through highly immoral means. Engagement with the modern world meant even those doing their utmost to achieve peace and justice on a global scale would necessarily have to violate the very principles for which they fought. Such an ironic dilemma could easily foster cynicism; Niebuhr instead counseled humility, caution, and hope.

If the hugely popular Serenity Prayer introduced Niebuhr's central philosophy to a wide audience, his 1943 *magnum opus* communicated a similar message in timely and stark terms. *The Nature and Destiny of Man* sought to validate Christianity as the only mechanism for moral action in a world gone insane. A theological vehicle for Niebuhr's thoughts about human nature in general, the two-volume work collected Niebuhr's 1939 Gifford Lectures into a (relatively) cohesive whole. Niebuhr stressed the innate sinfulness of mankind and the need for a counterweight to its seemingly limitless hubris—hubris to which a nation busy ridding the world of the Nazis might easily succumb: "Nations may fight for 'liberty' and 'democracy' but they do not do so until their vital interests are imperiled."⁷³ This emphasis on human limitations would prove prophetic in the shadow of new and horrifying weapons being developed in secret, which would soon come to dominate every aspect of international affairs.

Niebuhr, along with fellow ministers and theologians, decried the terror bombing of German and Japanese cities in a report released by the Federal Council of Churches in the immediate aftermath of the war.⁷⁴ In multiple articles published throughout World War II, Niebuhr challenged the efficacy and morality of Allied strategic bombing, which he said represented "a vivid revelation of the whole moral ambiguity of warfare."⁷⁵ His uneasy conscience balked at the horrifying massacre of noncombatants, which sometimes ranged in the tens of thousands in a single night.

⁷¹ Indeed, the majority of World War II casualties were civilians—statistics vary widely, but agree that many more civilians than military personnel died as a result of the conflict. See Hastings, *Retribution*, 541.

⁷² To this point, though Niebuhr was deeply troubled by America's unrestricted bombing of civilian population centers, he did note, "once bombing has been developed as an instrument of warfare, it is not possible to disavow its use without capitulating to the foe who refuses to disavow it." ("The Bombing of Germany," 3–4). The compromised morality of total war, reasoned Niebuhr, was justified by military necessity—an early example of Christian realism applied to warfare. See also Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 78.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, volume 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 213. This is an unambiguous reference to the US and its involvement in World War II.

⁷⁴ Davis Brown, *The Sword, the Cross, and the Eagle: The American Christian Just War Tradition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 40.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, "The Bombing of Germany," *Christianity and Society*, VIII (Summer 1943), 3. On this point, see also Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 76–80.

At odds with the prevailing military wisdom of the time, Niebuhr wrestled with the obvious contradictions of a country brought into the war by a bombing raid meting out the same punishment on its enemies.⁷⁶ Atomic weapons raised the moral stakes even higher, though Niebuhr's initial reaction was muted by his desire to avoid delegitimizing the Allied war effort. Niebuhr voiced cautious and qualified support for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, noting, "the use of the bomb was merely the culmination of our own strategy of total war."⁷⁷ Always circumspect about the justification of slaughter, however, Niebuhr also remarked at the similarities between the strategies of the Allies and their enemies in terms of bombing civilian targets—"critics have rightly pointed out that we [Americans] reached the level of Nazi morality in justifying the use" of such destructive weapons "on the grounds that [they] shortened the war."⁷⁸

Ultimately, atomic weapons to Niebuhr were simply another tool that could be brought to bear against a dangerous enemy bent on the destruction of the liberal world order. Despite this acquiescence, Niebuhr's old unease about power and pride remained at the front of his mind: he warned his readers to beware the arrogance of a nation at the height of international military power—what he called in September 1945 "an orgy of the most nauseous self-righteousness."⁷⁹

Thus, Niebuhr embraced the contradictory nature of atomic weapons as a "necessary evil" for the maintenance of democracy, just as he embraced the paradox of "just war." A wartime realist guided by Christian morality, Niebuhr had by 1945 emerged as America's preeminent political ethicist with a growing following of Christian realist policymakers who would inform public debate about America's foreign policy. For these public officials and intellectuals, Niebuhr's assessment of human nature and international realities would serve as a guide through the uncharted waters of international affairs in the Cold War.

ADAPTING CHRISTIAN REALISM TO AMERICA'S ATOMIC AGE:

"No redemption has ever been won without heroism."⁸⁰

The concept of heroism is a fundamental part of America's national ethos. From its earliest Puritan beginnings, the US identity has been bound up in a messianic mission

⁷⁶ Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 73–79.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, "The Atomic Bomb," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson, 232–35 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 233.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, "Our Relations to Japan," in *Hiroshima's Shadow*, ed. Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, 275–77 (Stony Creek, CT: The Pamphleteer's Press, 1998), 276.

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, untitled sermon, Box 14, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers.

to redeem a corrupt and sinful world in its own image.⁸¹ Niebuhr's civic theology adapted this American creed to the atomic age. For all his talk about limited objectives and dire warnings about the perils of war, Niebuhr's commitment to "redemptive" democratic ideals made him the necessary link between America's historic commitments and the realities of the Cold War. As his daughter Elisabeth put it,

It is implicit in virtually everything Pa wrote on the subject [of a just and durable peace in a nuclear age] that there's little point in having a foreign policy, or an arms policy, unless, as a nation, you know who you are, what sort of nation you are or imagine yourself to be.⁸²

Unlike America's previous struggles, the conflict between East and West was not clean-cut—the Cold War did not pit absolute moral purity against unadulterated evil. Niebuhr wryly observed, "We [Americans] find it almost as difficult as the communists to believe that anyone could think ill of us, since we are as persuaded as they that our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions."⁸³ At the height of a nuclear arms race, this statement was not a pessimistic criticism, but a call for prudent humility.

For the US to retain its moral legitimacy in the new Cold War, it would need to balance its principled certainties—individual liberty, democracy, and self-determination around the world—with the climate of fear, mistrust, and political uncertainty between itself and the USSR. Indeed, the presence of atomic weapons further complicated the choices leaders would have to make. If the Cold War ever went "hot," destruction of not only the two combatants but virtually all humanity was assured; such a war could never be "won." Yet despite these horrific consequences, the maintenance of a tolerable status quo meant that both sides not only had to develop and maintain ever-growing nuclear arsenals, but seriously consider their use and prepare for such an eventuality.

⁸¹ This messianic creed is a common theme throughout American politics and culture. A representative example from 1850 reads: "We Americans are the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. Seventy years ago we escaped from thrall; and, besides our first birthright—embracing one continent of earth—God has given to us, for future inheritance, the broad domains of the political pagans, that shall yet come and lie down under the shade of our ark, without bloody hands being lifted. God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a path through the New World that is ours. In our youth is our strength; in our inexperience our wisdom. At a period when other nations have but lisped, our deep voice is heard afar. Long enough have we been sceptics with regard to ourselves, and doubted whether, indeed, the Messiah had come. But he has come in *us*, if we would but give utterance to his promptings. And let us always remember that with ourselves, almost for the first time in the history of the earth, national selfishness is unbounded philanthropy; for we cannot do a good to America, but we give alms to the world." (Herman Melville, *White Jacket; or, The World In a Man-of-War*. [New York: Russell & Russell, 1963], 189). See also Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, and Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, and Niebuhr's own *Irony of American History*.

⁸² Sifton, *The Serenity Prayer*, 329.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1952, 24–25.

Niebuhr grappled with this horrific prospect. To him, violence could be justified, but only when applied “with a surgeon’s skill,” with “healing [that] must follow quickly upon its wounds.”⁸⁴ These caveats flew in the face of the indiscriminate killing sure to result from an atomic exchange. Nevertheless, Niebuhr endorsed the use of nuclear weapons as a last resort. His firm if unsatisfying conclusion that atomic bombs were defensible rested on grounds of discrete and achievable political goals.⁸⁵

By 1949, the questions of legitimacy surrounding atomic weapons were not merely academic; the Soviets had detonated their own bomb and confrontation between superpowers made nuclear war look like a real possibility. American religious figures were divided—pacifists condemned atomic weapons, while right-wing Protestants like L. Nelson Bell (father-in-law of the famous evangelist Billy Graham), called for a “first strike” on the USSR.⁸⁶

Niebuhr, for his part, reacted to the development of the Soviet bomb with steely-eyed resolve. In a 1950 Federal Council of Churches report, he allowed for the possibility of a just nuclear war in defense of American democracy against the Soviet Union.⁸⁷ In doing so, Niebuhr drew upon his earlier calls for war against the Nazi menace in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Attacking liberal idealists like former Vice President (and devout Christian) Henry Wallace, who favored a conciliatory approach toward the Soviet Union, Niebuhr wrote acerbically, “We are told that a policy of firmness must inevitably lead to war, while conciliation could guarantee peace. In the Nazi days this was called appeasement.”⁸⁸

Although Niebuhr often juxtaposed the danger of Nazism in the 1930s with the postwar Soviet threat, he did not entirely equate the two. Despite his early leftist leanings, Niebuhr nevertheless saw communism as a greater ideological foe because it constituted a “moral-political,” even idealistic doctrine rather than a nihilistic appeal to force.⁸⁹ Here, for once, Niebuhr’s dire warnings dovetailed with mainstream Christian opinion of the Godless communist menace.

The divisions within the American Christian community mirrored the debate in the country’s foreign policy establishment. Some, like Henry Wallace, remained convinced a peaceful diplomatic understanding with the Soviets remained possible. On the other hand, proponents of “rollback” advocated an aggressive strategy to reverse communist gains around the world and even effect regime change within their own borders. If rollback seemed an impossibly foolhardy enterprise, it was worth remembering the idea

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 220.

⁸⁵ Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1993* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 30–31, and Rosenthal, *Righteous Realists*, 80.

⁸⁶ Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left*, 43.

⁸⁷ Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 80.

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, “Our Chance for Peace,” *Christianity & Crisis* (February 1947), 1.

⁸⁹ Kevin Mattson, *When America Was Great: The Fighting Faith of Postwar Liberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 78.

had some prominent backers, including General Douglas MacArthur and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. MacArthur, for example urged for "total victory" over communist China in a letter to Congress, contrary to President Truman's "containment" policy and the wishes of America's European allies. Another advocate of rollback, the conservative commentator James Burnham, called for a "preventive showdown" with the communist world.⁹⁰

Niebuhr charted a characteristically middle course between these two quasi-religious extremes. His offhand comment that "there are many Christians who do not seem to know the difference between being a 'fool for Christ' and being a plain damn fool" perfectly captures his pragmatism.⁹¹ To Niebuhr, calls for total nuclear war against the Soviet Union were as foolhardy as Christian pacifists' refusal to endorse the fight against the Nazis a decade earlier. Driving home this point was Niebuhr's 1952 anticommunist polemic *The Irony of American History*. Niebuhr charged, "In every instance communism changes only partly dangerous sentimentalities and inconsistencies...into consistent and totally harmful ones."⁹² He likened the Soviet system to Don Quixote, "determined to destroy every knight and lady of civilization; and confident that this slaughter will purge the world of evil." He went even further, warning of communism's "satanic dimension."⁹³ In other publications, Niebuhr translated anti-Soviet rhetoric into explicit endorsements of the Cold War. In a 1951 issue of *Christianity and Crisis*, Niebuhr advocated the US "achieving such a preponderance of political, moral and military strength that the Soviets would not risk an attack."⁹⁴

Despite his vilification of Soviet communism, Niebuhr cautioned Americans not to be "driven to hysteria by" the "tragic vicissitudes of history."⁹⁵ He feared that "we might be tempted to bring history to a tragic conclusion by one final and mighty attempt to overcome its frustrations."⁹⁶ In case the reader was left in any doubt, Niebuhr clarified, "the political term for such an effort is 'preventive war.' It is not an immediate temptation, but it could become so in the next decade or two."⁹⁷ Niebuhr's qualification, or restraint, of anticommunism was informed not only by his own desire to moderate the political and religious extremes of his day, but by the stark reality of a global nuclear exchange.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 76.

⁹¹ Niebuhr, quoted in Robert McAfee Brown, "Reinhold Niebuhr: a Study in Humanity and Humility," in *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1–7, 3.

⁹² Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 15.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Niebuhr, "Ten Fateful Years," *Christianity and Crisis* 11 (Feb. 5, 1951), 1–4, 2.

⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 145–46.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 146

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Niebuhr's Christian realism sought to reconcile American ideals with a profoundly dangerous world. Paul Nitze, an admirer of Niebuhr, used the language of Christian realism in his seminal NSC-68 report even while advocating a huge US military buildup:

The free society is limited in its choice of means to achieve its ends. Compulsion is the negation of freedom, except when it is used to enforce the rights common to all. The resort to force, internally or externally, is therefore a last resort for a free society. The act is permissible only when one individual or groups of individuals within it threaten the basic rights of other individuals... The resort to force, to compulsion, to the imposition of its will is therefore a difficult and dangerous act for a free society, which is warranted only in the face of even greater dangers.⁹⁸

Nitze clashed with another prominent self-proclaimed Niebuhrian, George Kennan, on the proper balance between "hard" and "soft" power. The fact that two of Niebuhr's disciples could hold different opinions about US foreign policy highlights the fact that Niebuhr's ideas and ideals only indirectly translate into the realm of practical application.⁹⁹ Nevertheless, both Nitze and Kennan remained ever-mindful of the fact that their opposition to Soviet expansionism could not be considered a pure moral good, heeding Niebuhr's advice that "frantic anti-communism can become so similar in its temper of hatefulness to communism itself."¹⁰⁰

Christian realism remained a mindset more than a doctrine—what Niebuhr described as "an existential awareness of the limits, as well as the possibilities, of human power and goodness."¹⁰¹ Critics (beginning with Niebuhr's contemporaries and continuing today) assert this awareness can lead to logical incongruities, as it depends on a nuanced understanding of human nature and a high degree of situational awareness. David L. Clough and Brian Stiltner, for example, characterized the Christian realist position regarding moral limitations on violence:

They express the importance of the moral limit; recognize that in this imperfect and sinful world, holding to the limit can have bad consequences; violate the limit with a mournful attitude if the consequences seem important enough; and then describe how the limit still retains its value as an ideal.¹⁰²

Niebuhr's seeming lack of consistency, however, demonstrated not a confused philosophy, but a rigorous search for moral choices in a very troubled world. He did not seek to definitively *answer* the great moral questions of his day; rather, he urged the

⁹⁸ Paul Nitze, "A Report to the National Security Council by the Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security (NSC-68)," (April 14, 1950), Box 180, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf, 10–11.

⁹⁹ For more on the relationship between Nitze, Kennan, and Niebuhr, see Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009).

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *Irony of American History*, 170.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² David L. Clough and Brian Stiltner, *Faith and Force: A Christian Debate about War* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 122–23.

continual questioning of America's particular actions and objectives to avoid the twin dangers of hubris and naïveté.

This questioning approach, never taking for granted the rightness of US policy or the evil of its adversaries, was arguably Niebuhr's single greatest contribution. Niebuhr's emphatic focus the premise of a single humanity united in its fall from grace injected a healthy dose of humility into any discussion about the relative superiority of America and its values. Niebuhr's genius was his recognition that America's self-conception as a messianic force for good unlocked its *potential* for moral global hegemony beyond simple pursuit of narrow national interest—by 1945, this meant nothing less than the preservation of democratic civilization.¹⁰³ But Niebuhr knew that Americans' consciousness of their duty could backfire—leading to an unmatched capacity to commit (and hypocritically justify) hideous crimes with the latest horrifying technologies.

Niebuhr claimed, "The pride of nations consists in the tendency to make unconditioned claims for their conditioned values."¹⁰⁴ Yet he never lapsed into skeptical iconoclasm. For all searching of America's national soul, Niebuhr displayed a firm commitment to its core idealistic principles of freedom and dignity for all. His critical humility bridged the gap between his country's redemptive liberal vision for the world and the realities of its newfound global dominance. By the beginning of the Cold War, the US possessed the capability to obliterate its enemies in an atomic fireball. Niebuhr reminded American policymakers and intellectuals that unparalleled capability to destroy did not equal God-like ability to bend the world to its will.

Nearly 70 years after Hiroshima, the US has maintained its position of supreme global power, and still retains an unrivaled capability to mete out hellish destruction nearly anywhere on earth. Yet Niebuhr reminds us—through his ironic, even at times tragic ethos encapsulated in the *Serenity Prayer*—that neither the atomic weapons of his own day nor today's "smart bombs" could cleanse evil from the earth. Power and pride unchecked by virtue and humility are useless to a nation conceived as a universal redeemer; Niebuhr challenged his generation (and continues to exhort us today) never to forget the constraints of human fallibility and a moral worldview in the role of global leadership.

¹⁰³ Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 75–76.

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, 213.

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