Illusions of Managing History: The Enduring Relevance of Reinhold Niebuhr*

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Reinhold Niebuhr, a towering presence in American intellectual life from the 1930s through the 1960s, thought deeply about the dilemmas confronting the United States as a consequence of its emergence as a global superpower. The truths he spoke are uncomfortable ones. They do not easily translate into sound bites suitable for the Sunday morning talk shows. Nor do they offer material from which to weave the sort of stump speech likely to boost the poll numbers of your favorite candidate in Iowa or New Hampshire. Four of those truths merit particular attention at present. They are the persistent sin of American Exceptionalism; the indecipherability of history; the false allure of simple solutions; and, finally, the imperative of appreciating the limits of power.

One persistent theme of Niebuhr’s writings on foreign policy concerns the difficulty that Americans have in seeing themselves as they really are. “Perhaps the most significant moral characteristic of a nation,” he declared in 1932, “is its hypocrisy.” Niebuhr did not exempt his own nation from that judgment. The chief distinguishing feature of American hypocrisy lies in the conviction that America’s very founding was a providential act, both an expression of divine favor and a summons to serve as God’s chosen instrument. The Anglo-American colonists settling these shores, according to Niebuhr, saw it as America’s purpose “to make a new beginning in a corrupt world.” They believed “that we had been called out by God to create a new humanity.” They believed further that this covenant with God marked America as a new Israel.

As a Chosen People possessing what Niebuhr referred to as a “Messianic consciousness,” Americans came to see themselves as set apart, their motives irreproachable, their actions not to be judged by standards applied to others. “Every nation has its own form of spiritual pride,” Niebuhr observed in The Irony of American History. “Our version is that our nation turned its back upon the vices of Europe and made a new beginning.” Even after World War II, he wrote, the United States remained “an adolescent nation, with illusions of childlike innocence.” Indeed, the outcome of World War II, vaulting the United States to the apex of world power, seemed to affirm that the nation enjoyed God’s favor and was doing God’s work.

Such illusions have proven remarkably durable.

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Americans might as a first step achieve what Niebuhr referred to as “the honesty of knowing that we are not honest.”

Why is this so important? Because self-awareness is an essential precondition to Americans acquiring a more mature appreciation of history generally. On this point, Niebuhr was scathing and relentless. Those who pretend to understand history’s direction and ultimate destination are, in his view, charlatans or worse. Unfortunately, the times in which we live provide a plethora of opportunities for frauds and phonies to peddle such wares.

In Niebuhr’s view, although history may be purposeful, it is also opaque, a drama in which both the story line and the dénouement remain hidden from view. The twists and turns that the plot has already taken suggest the need for a certain degree of modesty in forecasting what is still to come. Yet, as Niebuhr wrote, “modern man lacks the humility to accept the fact that the whole drama of history is enacted in a frame of meaning too large for human comprehension or management.” Such humility is in particular short supply in present-day Washington. There, especially among neoconservatives and neo-liberals, the conviction persists that Americans are called upon to serve, in Niebuhr’s most memorable phrase, “as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection.”

The collapse of the Bush administration’s hubristic strategy for the Middle East would not have surprised our prophet. Nearly fifty years ago he cautioned that “even the most powerful nations cannot master their own destiny.” Like it or not, even great powers are subject to vast forces beyond their ability to control or even understand, “caught in a web of history in which many desires, hopes, wills, and ambitions, other than their own, are operative.” The masterminds who conceived the Iraq War imagined that they could sweep away the old order and usher into existence a new Iraq expected to be liberal, democratic, and aligned with the United States. Their exertions have only demonstrated, in Niebuhr’s words, that “[t]he recalcitrant forces in the historical drama have a power and persistence beyond our reckoning.”

The first of our four truths (the persistent sin of American Exceptionalism) intersects with our second (the indecipherability of history) to produce the third, namely, the false allure of simple solutions. Nations possessed of outsized confidence in their own military prowess are notably susceptible to the apparent prospect of simple solutions, as the examples of Germany in 1914, Japan in 1937, and the Soviet Union in 1979 suggest. Yet Americans—patience never their long suit—are by no means immune to such temptations.

What Niebuhr wrote back in 1958 remains true today: “the American nation has become strangely enamored with military might.”

Niebuhr regarded this line of reasoning with horror. “The idea of a preventive war,” he wrote, “sometimes tempts minds, whose primary preoccupation is the military defense of a nation and who think it might be prudent to pick the most propitious moment for the start of what they regard as inevitable hostilities. But the rest of us must resist such ideas with every moral resource.” In Niebuhr’s judgment, the concept of preventive war falls both normatively and pragmatically. It is not only morally wrong; it is also stupid. “Nothing in history is inevitable,” he observed, “including the probable. So long as war has not broken out, we still have the possibility of avoiding it. Those who think that there is little difference between a cold and a hot war are either knaves or fools.”

Throughout the second half of the 20th century such cautionary views, shared by American presidents, helped avoid a nuclear conflagration. Between 2002 and 2003 they did not suffice to carry the day. The knives and fools got their war, which has yielded not the neat and tidy outcome promised, but a host of new complications. Yet that has not dissuaded those still committed to the proposition that military power offers simple solutions to otherwise daunting problems. Keen to dispose of the difficulties we have brought upon ourselves in Iraq, they are now calling for an even wider application of the Bush Doctrine, with Iran likely the next target.

Finally there is the imperative of appreciating the limits of power, for Niebuhr the very foundation of sound statecraft. In reading and re-reading many of Niebuhr’s works in preparing this essay, the most discomforting passage I came across was this one, written in 1937:

One of the most pathetic aspects of human history is that every civilization expresses itself most pretentiously, compounds its partial and universal values most convincingly, and claims immortality for its finite existence at the very moment when the decay which leads to death has already begun.

We Americans certainly live in a time when our political leaders have made pretentious proclamations something of a specialty, despite mounting evidence of decay apparent everywhere from the national debt (now approaching $8 trillion) to the trade imbalance (surpassing $800 billion last year) and the level of oil imports (exceeding 60% of daily requirements). A large gap is opening up between the professional aspirations of our political class—still all but unanimously committed to the United States asserting a role of what is euphemistically called “global leadership”—and the means available to fulfill those aspirations. Each of the last four presidential administrations has relied on military might to conceal or minimize the significance of this gap. Unfortunately, with the Iraq War now having demonstrated that U.S. military power has very real limits, our claim of possessing “the greatest military the world has ever seen” no longer carries quite the clout that it once did.

“To the end of history,” Niebuhr predicted, “social orders will probably destroy themselves in the effort to prove that they are indestructible.” So it may be with the United States, which today finds itself in a position akin to that of the aging and flabby heavyweight champ, who is seriously in hock to the IRS, yet can see no alternative but to climb back into the ring. The champ needs to clean up his act and to devote himself to new pursuits. Niebuhr would likely counsel the United States to follow a similar course. “The greater danger,” he warned a half-century ago, “is that we will rely too much on military strength in general and neglect all the other political, economic, and moral factors” that constitute the wellsprings of “unity, health, and strength.” The time to confront this neglect is at hand.

We do so by giving up our Messianic dreams and ceasing our efforts to coerce history in a particular direction. This does not imply a policy of isolationism. It does imply attending less to the world outside of our borders and more to the circumstances within. It means ratcheting down our expectations. Americans need what Niebuhr described as “a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom and power available to us for the resolution of [history’s] perplexities.”

The difficult challenges facing the United States require us to go forward, not back. Yet here, too, Niebuhr, speaking to us from the days of Truman and Eisenhower, offers some suggestive insights on how best to proceed. By the time that The Irony of American History appeared in 1952, Niebuhr had evolved a profound appreciation for the domestic roots of U.S. foreign policy. He understood that the expansionist impulse central to the American diplomatic tradition derived in no small measure from a determination to manage the internal contradictions produced by the American way of life.

From the very founding of the republic, Ameri-
can political leaders had counted on the promise and the reality of ever-greater material abundance to resolve or at least alleviate those contradictions. As Niebuhr wrote, “we seek a solution for practically every problem of life in quantitative terms,” convinced that more is better. It has long been, he explained,

the character of our particular democracy, founded on a vast continent, expanding as a culture with its expanding frontier and creating new frontiers of opportunity when the old geographic frontier ended, that every ethical and social problem of a just distribution of the privileges of life is solved by so enlarging the privileges that either an equitable distribution is made easier, or a lack of equity is rendered less noticeable.

No other national community had “followed this technique of social adjustment more consistently than we. No other community had the resources to do so.” Through a strategy of commercial and territorial expansion, the United States accrued power and fostered material abundance at home. Expectations of ever increasing affluence—Niebuhr called it “the American cult of prosperity”—in turn accelerated social tensions and (with the notable exception of the Civil War) kept internal dissent within bounds, so. Through a strategy of commercial and territorial expansion, the United States accrued power and fostered material abundance at home. Expectations of ever increasing affluence—Niebuhr called it “the American cult of prosperity”—in turn accelerated social tensions and (with the notable exception of the Civil War) kept internal dissent within bounds, thereby permitting individual Americans to pursue their disparate notions of life, liberty, and happiness. Yet even in 1952 Niebuhr expressed doubts about this strategy’s long-term viability. Acknowledging that “we have thus far sought to solve all our problems by the expansion of our economy,” he went on to say that “[this expansion cannot go on forever."

This brings us to the nub of the matter. Considering things strictly from the perspective of national self-interest, and acknowledging various blunders made along the way, a strategy that relies on expansion abroad to facilitate the creation of a more perfect union at home has worked remarkably well. At least it did so through the 1960s and the Vietnam War. Since that time, the positive correlation between expansionism and prosperity, national power and individual freedom has begun to unravel. Since 2003 and the beginning of the Iraq War, it has become almost entirely undone.

The ongoing U.S. effort to transform the Middle East is dissipating rather than enhancing American power. It is squandering rather than adding to our collective wealth. Rather than ensuring political freedom at home, it provides the Bush administration with pretexts to compromise our freedoms by distorting or annulling the Constitution.

By no means least of all, that effort is exacting a huge moral price. I refer here not simply to the morally dubious policies devised to prosecute the global war on terror. At least as troubling is the moral dissonance generated by sending soldiers off to fight for freedom in distant lands when freedom at home appears increasingly to have become a synonym for prolifigacy, conspicuous consumption, and frivolous self-absorption. While U.S. troops are engaged in Baghdad, Babylon, and Samarra—place names redolent with ancient imperial connotations—their civilian counterparts back on the block preoccupy themselves with YouTube, reality TV, and the latest misadventures of Hollywood celebrities.

Speaking for myself—although I hope in the spirit of Reinhold Niebuhr—this defines the essential crisis we face today. The basic precepts that inform U.S. national security policy are not making us safer and more prosperous while guaranteeing authentic freedom. They have multiplied our enemies and put us on the road to ruin, while indulging notions of freedom that are shallow and spurious. The imperative of the moment is to change fundamentally our approach to the world. Yet this is unlikely to occur absent a serious and self-critical examination of the domestic arrangements and priorities that define what we loosely refer to as the American Way of Life.

“No one sings odes to liberty as the final end of life with greater fervor than Americans,” Niebuhr once observed. Yet it might also be said that no one shows less interest in discerning the true meaning of liberty than do Americans. Although I would not want to sell my countrymen short—the United States has in the past demonstrated a remarkable ability to weather crises and recover from adversity—I see little evidence today of interest in undertaking a critical assessment of our way of life, which would necessarily entail something akin to a sweeping cultural reformation.

Certainly, President Bush will not promote such a self-assessment. Nor will any of the leading candidates vying to succeed him. Given the current nature of the political elite, the governing class, the Washington Party—call it what you will—there is little likelihood of a Great Awakening starting from the top. We can only hope that before too many further catastrophes befall us, fortuitous circumstances will bring about what Niebuhr referred to as “the ironic triumph of the wisdom of common sense over the foolishness of its wise men.”

In the meantime, we should recall the warning with which Niebuhr concluded The Irony of American History. Should the United States perish, the prophet wrote,

the ruthlessness of the foe would be only the secondary cause of the disaster. The primary cause would be that the strength of a giant nation was directed by eyes too blind to see all the hazards of the struggle; and the blindness would be induced not by some accident of nature or history but by hatred and vainglory.

Change each “would be” to “was” and you have the admission well-suited for the memorial that will no doubt be erected one day in Washington honoring those who sacrificed their lives in Iraq.

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1. Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 95.
3. Ibid., 69, 28, 109.
4. Ibid., 57.
5. Ibid., 74.
6. Ibid., 110, 113, 21.
8. Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 133.
10. Ibid., n iii.
17. Niebuhr, World Crisis, 76.
18. See, for example, Norman Podhoretz, “The Case for Bombing Iran,” Commentary (June 2007).
23. Niebuhr, Beyond Tragedy, 224.
24. Niebuhr, World Crisis, 35.
26. Ibid., 59-60, 56, 55, 29.
27. Ibid, 91.
28. Ibid, 106.