

H-Diplo

H-Diplo Review ESSAY

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Published on 9 March 2010

H-Diplo Review Essays Editor: Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

Reinhold Niebuhr. *The Irony of American History*, with a new introduction by Andrew Bacevich. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008. Xxv + 174 pp. ISBN: 9780226583983 (\$17.00, paper).

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/essays/PDF/Stoler-Niebuhr.pdf>

Reviewed for H-Diplo by **Mark A. Stoler**, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Vermont

In preparation for writing this review, I read *The Irony of American History* for a second time. I had first read it nearly thirty years earlier when I team-taught, with the chair of the Religion Department at my university,¹ an undergraduate seminar in the political and religious thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. I offered that seminar primarily to learn much more about this American theologian, who oddly (to me anyway) had been cited by Walter LaFeber and other historians as a key to understanding U.S. Cold War policies.² I was not disappointed. My Religion Department colleague put together an impressive required reading list of Niebuhr's major writings, one that included *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) as well as *The Irony of American History* (1952), and I came away from the course deeply impressed with Niebuhr and his importance. To say he influenced my understanding of history in general as well as U.S. foreign relations, and indeed of life itself, would be a gross understatement.

I was, of course, far from alone. "He cast an intellectual spell on my generation," Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote in 1992.³ Niebuhr deeply influenced not simply fellow Protestant theologians, but also his Catholic and Jewish colleagues as well as secular intellectuals

¹ Professor Luther H. Martin, Jr., of the University of Vermont.

² I first became aware of Niebuhr's importance to U.S. foreign relations as a graduate student in the late 1960s while reading the first edition of LaFeber's *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945-1966* (New York: Wiley, 1967), which is now in its tenth edition. See in particular pp. 40-41.

³ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Long Shadow," *The New York Times*, June 22, 1992.

such as Schlesinger and even atheists. And of course he influenced policymakers—most notably but far from exclusively George F. Kennan, who famously labeled him “the father of us all” and even invited him to participate in discussions of his State Department Policy Planning Staff in the late 1940s.⁴

Niebuhr faded from public and scholarly view after his death in 1971. Schlesinger claimed it was because “his Christian realism passed out of fashion in the hippie 60’s and 70’s and yuppie 70’s and 80’s,”⁵ but at least as important as such cultural shifts was the arrogance and certainty that accompanied the end of the Cold War. With Americans basking in their great “victory” over the Soviet Union and viewing it as an ideological “end of history” that guaranteed the global triumph of their democratic capitalism, who wanted to listen to a prophetic voice that had warned a previous generation about human limits and the permanency of sin in human behavior?

Such self-congratulation and ideological pretensions were, of course, the very reasons to listen to Niebuhr’s warnings, and a Niebuhr revival began in the 1990s. It gained increasing momentum over the last decade, especially amongst opponents of George W. Bush’s Manichean worldview and ensuing global “War on Terror” against “evildoers,” as well as the arrogant certainty of his advisers—an arrogance aptly illustrated by the extraordinary 2004 comments of a senior White House aide who informed journalist Ron Susskind that “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality. . .we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”⁶

Niebuhr would have understood such arrogance perfectly. Indeed, he had prophetically warned against it, and throughout the Bush years those warnings looked increasingly prescient and were increasingly cited by critics. One might argue that this Niebuhrian revival reached a crescendo of sorts with the election of Barack Obama, a self-declared Niebuhr disciple, to the presidency in 2008. Quite appropriately, and far from coincidentally, this reissue by the University of Chicago Press of Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History*, 56 years after its original publication in 1952, is accompanied by a quote from Obama about “one of my favorite philosophers” and a new introduction by Boston University historian Andrew Bacevich.

⁴ LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War*, 54; Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 238. According to Fox, “Kennan may once have described Niebuhr as ‘the father of us all,’ as has been widely reported, but in 1980 he did not recall doing so. And the phrase does not accurately convey his feelings about him.”

⁵ Ibid. See also Schlesinger’s later and more expansive “Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr,” *The New York Times Magazine*, Sept. 18, 2005.

⁶ Ron Susskind, “Without A Doubt,” *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Oct. 17, 2004.

Obama's quote about Niebuhr emphasizes his "compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world," that "we should be humble and modest in our belief that we can eliminate those things," but that "we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction." Within his introduction Bacevich goes further, maintaining that *Irony of American History* "provides the master key. . . to understanding the myths and delusions that underpin this new American view of statecraft. Simply put, it is the most important book ever written on U.S. foreign policy."⁷ In his own writings, most recently *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, Bacevich has shown why this may be the case. Indeed, that volume provides a brilliant and provocative fusion of Niebuhr's ideas and insights with those of radical 1960s historian William Appleman Williams to provide a scathing critique not simply of contemporary American foreign policy, but of American life in general.⁸

Whether that critique belongs on the Left or the traditional conservative Right is an open question, especially in light of Bacevich's own beliefs. Clearly, however, it does not belong on the contemporary neoconservative Right, which comes in for withering blasts in *The Limits of Power*. Nevertheless, numerous neoconservatives have cited Niebuhr as a major influence on their own thought as well. Indeed, I was stunned to discover in the late 1990s that the neoconservative political scientist with whom I team-taught a course entitled "Contending Interpretations of American Foreign Policy" cited Niebuhr as one of the major influences on his own thought while I cited him as one of the major influences on my leftist political beliefs.⁹ How, one might ask, could this be the case?

To understand Niebuhr's apparent appeal across the political spectrum one must first examine his thought in general and the world within which he lived. The standard cliché is that Niebuhr in his writings re-emphasized for the first time in many years of American Christianity the concept of original sin. While true, that cliché grossly distorts and oversimplifies Niebuhr's thoughts. At the risk of further distorting and oversimplifying those thoughts, let me offer the summary that follows.

Power, Niebuhr maintained, is simultaneously necessary to fight evil and inherently corrupting and bound to lead to sin. That is because humans lust after power, which they then use unjustly to dominate others. They do so because they are insecure, and that insecurity stems from the fact that they are mortal. The Christian need and ability to do

⁷ Obama's quote is on the back cover of this edition; Andrew Bacevich's quote is on p. ix of his introduction.

⁸ Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2008)

⁹ That political scientist was Robert Kaufman, now of Pepperdine University and author of *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007).

good and fight evil was thus inextricably interwoven with evil. In reaching such a conclusion, Niebuhr was directly attacking the doctrine of perfectibility that had so deeply influenced American Christianity since at least the Second Great Awakening in the early nineteenth century. Humans, he argued, were inherently flawed and sinful. But in the context of the years within which he wrote, Niebuhr was also attacking the American churches' efforts to maintain moral purity by refusing to touch power—domestically by ignoring politics in general and the plight of the poor in particular, and internationally by supporting isolationism and pacifism in the presence of the hideous evil represented first by Nazism and then by Soviet Communism. That effort to avoid sin by renunciation of power was thus sinful in itself. Good Christians had to act in the world against evil, even though in the process they became sinners. Niebuhr himself acted on this belief by championing the right of labor to organize in Henry Ford's Detroit as well as the civil rights of Blacks and Jews in light of the prevailing racism and anti-Semitism of the interwar years, and by joining the Socialist Party. But by 1940 he had broken with the Socialists and was supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt, calling for intervention in the Second World War against Nazi Germany, and attacking Christian as well as Socialist pacifism. After the war he helped found Americans for Democratic Action and supported an activist foreign policy against the Communist Soviet Union.

By 1952, however, Niebuhr had witnessed not simply the defeat of Nazism and the Cold War victories in Europe resulting from the Marshall Plan, but also American defeat and Communist victory in China, resentment against the United States in the emerging Third World, military stalemate in Korea, and the hysteria of the resulting Second Red Scare at home. The core problem had shifted in his mind from getting Americans to participate in the world on a realistic basis, something he had emphasized in his preceding works, to getting them to realize the limits of their ability to control world events and Third World peoples who did not think the way they did and who did not view them in the same favorable light that they viewed themselves.

The Irony of American History was his major effort to do so. Niebuhr in his previous writings had consistently emphasized the general need to temper idealism with realism and to realize the self-interest and ensuing dangers and evil inherent in all utopian ideologies; but now he focused on the specific need to recognize and control the dangerous messianic streak that had existed in American history ever since the Puritans and that had been reinforced over time by American abundance and ideology, as well as more recently by the social sciences with their pretensions regarding the ability to understand and control human behavior. That messianism, he now implied, ran the danger of turning into an imperialism just as blind and sinful as the previous isolationism in the denial of responsibility to others and inability to understand “that power cannot be wielded without guilt, since it is never transcendent over interest. . . .”¹⁰ “Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, 37.

it is doing God's service when it is violating all His laws," Niebuhr quoted John Adams in emphasizing this point.¹¹ Humans usually failed to see the self-interest inherent in the universal ideologies they espoused. This, he maintained, was in Christian terms "the very essence of sin," the identification of "the interests of a particular self or of a particular force in history with the final purposes of the God of history."¹² Communism was particularly sinful in this regard, and for that reason, among others, it constituted an even more dangerous foe than Nazism.¹³ But Americans were also falling victim to this fatal human flaw. They had never, he emphasized, been as innocent and virtuous as they maintained, and their history was filled with ironies regarding their beliefs and behavior.

What could save them, Niebuhr emphasized was both their practicality, which in the past had tempered the excesses of their ideology, and the ideas of such thinkers as John Adams and James Madison, who had possessed a better understanding of human nature than Thomas Jefferson and who had emphasized the importance of balancing power against power domestically as well as internationally. Niebuhr quoted extensively from Madison's *Federalist #10* in this regard. He also maintained that American democracy had triumphed in spite of, not because of its theories of innocence and other ideological pretensions. Those pretensions had resulted from the American rejection of the Christian doctrine of original sin, which "asserts the obvious fact that all men are persistently inclined to regard themselves more highly and are more assiduously concerned with their own interest than any 'objective' view of their importance would warrant."¹⁴

Far from surprisingly, Niebuhr ended *The Irony of American History* by calling for repentance and humility. The Christian view of history, he maintained, was ironic rather than tragic or pathetic in its emphasis on evil being caused by pretensions beyond human freedom as well as individual responsibility for situations due to unconscious weakness rather than conscious choice. But American history also showed how to grapple with these ironies, most notably in Abraham Lincoln's combination of action, humility and doubt.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 122.

¹³ "Communism is not merely another version of Nazism," he wrote in this regard. "Nazism was a morally cynical creed which defied every norm of justice. It represented a moral nihilism which could have developed only in the decay of a highly developed and sophisticated civilization. Communism is a morally utopian creed which has a much wider appeal than Nazism because it speaks in the name of justice rather than in defiance of justice; and it is ostensibly devoted to the establishment of a universal society, rather than to the supremacy of a race or nation. The fact that its illusory hopes are capable of generating cruelties and tyrannies, exceeding even those of a cynical creed, can be understood only if it is realized how much more plausible and dangerous the corruption of the good can be in human history than explicit evil." Ibid., 128.

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

First published in 1952, *The Irony of American History* obviously appears dated today in its emphasis on the appeal and menace of Communism, as well as its references to writers of Niebuhr's era. In other aspects, however, it remains remarkably relevant to the present. Indeed, Niebuhr's comparison of the American response to the rise of Communism with Christian Europe's response to the rise of Islam in the high Middle Ages takes on a new and ironic meaning in the contemporary world. Some of the measures Americans had taken against Communism, he wrote, "are informed by the same lack of realism which characterized the Crusades." And when Islamic power finally did wane, it was not so much the result of actions by its foes "as by its own inner corruptions. The Sultan of Turkey found it ultimately impossible to support the double role of political head of a nation and the spiritual head of the Islamic world." Stalin and/or his successors would face the same problem as head of both the Russian nation and "an ostensibly world-wide political religion. If we fully understand the deep springs which feed the illusions of this religion," Niebuhr concluded, "the nature of the social resentments which nourish them and the realities of life which must ultimately refute them, we might acquire the necessary patience to wait out the long run of history while we take such measures as are necessary to combat the more immediate perils."¹⁵ That patience clearly informed Kennan's Cold War policy of Containment, and if Niebuhr and Kennan were alive today they would in all likelihood use the success of that policy to support similar patience in the contemporary struggle against Islamic fundamentalism.

In that struggle, neoconservatives see in Niebuhr an emphasis on the existence of evil in the world and the need to fight it, even if one has to sin in order to do so. Their opponents on the other side of the political spectrum focus instead on Niebuhr's assault on all messianic pretensions that accompany such struggles and the need to understand the limits of what can be done. Both are correct, though an added irony is that some liberals now lecture conservatives on the limits of power rather than vice versa as has traditionally been the case. Then again, Niebuhr was himself a supporter of liberal causes, though not liberal pretensions, and the meaning of liberal and conservative has changed rather dramatically since Niebuhr's time. But that is another story for another review.

Niebuhr famously prayed for God to grant him the serenity to accept the things he could not change, the courage to change the things he could, and the wisdom to know the difference. In today's political world, the Niebuhr one professes to follow probably depends on what one believes can and cannot be changed.

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¹⁵ Ibid., 128-29.

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U.S. diplomatic and military history include *Allies in War: Britain and America Against the Axis, 1940-1945*, *George C. Marshall: Soldier-Statesman of the American Century*, and *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance and U.S. Strategy in World War II*. He served as the president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) in 2004 and in late 2008 was appointed editor of the George C. Marshall Papers.

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