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Niebuhr and Our Times

Andrew J. Bacevich

As pastor, teacher, activist, moral theologian, and prolific author, Reinhold Niebuhr was a towering presence in American intellectual life from the 1930s through the 1960s. He was, at various points in his career, a Christian Socialist, a pacifist, an advocate of U.S. intervention in World War II, a staunch anti-Communist, an architect of Cold War liberalism, and a sharp critic of the Vietnam War.

For contemporary Americans, inclined to believe that history began anew on September 11, 2001, the controversies that engaged Niebuhr's attention during his long career appear not only distant but also permanently settled and therefore largely irrelevant to the present day. At least among members of the general public, Niebuhr himself is today a forgotten figure.

Among elites, however, evidence suggests that interest in Niebuhr has begun to revive. When historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., who knew Niebuhr well and admired him greatly, published an essay in 2005 lamenting that his friend had vanished from public consciousness, the first indications of this resurgent interest had already begun to appear. Today politicians like John McCain and Barack Obama cite Niebuhr as a major influence. Pundits like neoconservative David Brooks and neoliberal Peter Beinart embellish their writings with references to Niebuhr. A new edition of Niebuhr's classic 1952 meditation on U.S. foreign

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policy, *The Irony of American History*, long out of print, is in the works. The political theorist William Galston has recently gone so far as to describe Niebuhr as “the man of the hour.”

Many of those who are reincorporating Niebuhr into American public discourse are doing so at Niebuhr’s expense. Cribbing from Niebuhr’s works to bolster their own preconceived convictions, they mangle his meaning and distort his intentions. In his book *The Good Fight*, Peter Beinart transforms Niebuhr into a dues-paying neoliberal and enlists him in the cause of “making America great again.” For Beinart, Niebuhr’s “core insight” is that “America should not fall in love with the supposed purity of its intentions.” Niebuhr “knew that it was not just other countries that should fear the corruption of American power; we ourselves should fear it most of all.” Yet once aware of its imperfections, the United States becomes an unstoppable force. In Beinart’s words, “only when America recognizes that it is not inherently good can it become great.” By running Niebuhr through his own literary blender, Beinart contrives a rationale for American Exceptionalism and a justification for the global war on terrorism.

In *The Mighty and the Almighty*, Madeleine Albright throws in the occasional dollop of Niebuhr to lend weight to an otherwise insipid work. Sagely quoting Niebuhr with regard to the persistence of conflict in human history, the former secretary of state briskly skirts around the implications of that insight. For Albright, Niebuhr simply teaches that “the pursuit of peace will always be uphill.” In no time at all, she is back to reciting clichés about “what the right kind of leadership” can do “to prevent wars, rebuild devastated societies, expand freedom, and assist the poor.” The Albright who cheerfully glimpses the emergence of “a globe on which might and right are close companions and where dignity and freedom are shared by all” nods respectfully in Niebuhr’s direction, but embodies the very antithesis of Niebuhr’s own perspective.

John McCain also holds Niebuhr in high regard. In *Hard Call*, his latest best-seller, McCain expounds at length on Niebuhr writings, which, he says, teach that “there are worse things than war, and human beings have a moral responsibility to oppose those worse things.” Soon enough, however, it becomes clear that McCain is less interested in learning from Niebuhr than in appropriating him to support his own views. Thus, McCain broadly hints that were Niebuhr alive today, he would surely share the senator’s own hawkish stance on Iraq.

Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Paul Elie observes that with his rediscovery, Niebuhr is fast becoming the “man for all reasons,” his posthumous support insistently claimed by various interpreters who resemble one another in one respect only: they all profess to have divined the authentic Niebuhr. Yet press-

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ing Niebuhr into service on behalf of any and all causes will make him irrelevant even as it makes him once again familiar. The predicaments in which the United States finds itself enmeshed today—particularly in the realm of foreign policy—demand that we let Niebuhr speak for himself. We need to let Niebuhr be Niebuhr. In particular, we need to heed his warning that “our dreams of managing history pose a large and potentially mortal threat to the United States.”

Since the end of the Cold War, the management of history has emerged as the all but explicitly stated purpose of American statecraft. In Washington, politicians speak knowingly about history’s clearly-discerned purpose and about the responsibility of the United States, at the zenith of its power, to guide history to its intended destination.

None have advanced this proposition with greater fervor and, on occasion, with greater eloquence than George W. Bush. Here is the president in January 2005 at his second inaugural, alluding to the challenges posed by Iraq while defending his decision to invade that country.

[B]ecause we have acted in the great liberating tradition of this nation, tens of millions have achieved their freedom. And as hope kindles hope, millions more will find it. By our efforts, we have lit a fire as well—a fire in the minds of men. It warms those who feel its power, it burns those who fight its progress, and one day this untamed fire of freedom will reach the darkest corners of our world.

The temptation to dismiss such remarks, especially coming from this president, as so much hot air is strong. Yet, better to view the passage as authentically American, President Bush expressing sentiments that could just as well have come from the lips of Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson or Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy or Ronald Reagan. In remarkably few words, the president affirms a narrative to which the majority of our fellow citizens subscribe, while also staking out for the United States claims that most of them endorse.

This narrative renders the past in ways that purport to reveal the future. Its defining features are simplicity, clarity, and conviction. The story it tells unfolds along predetermined lines, leaving no doubt or ambiguity. History, the president goes on to explain, “has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author

of Liberty.” Furthermore, at least by implication, the “Author of Liberty” has specifically anointed the United States as the Agent of Liberty. Thus assured, and proclaiming that “America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one,” the president declares that “We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom.”

President Bush’s depiction of the past is sanitized, selective, and self-serving where not simply false. The great liberating tradition to which he refers is, to a considerable extent, poppycock. The president celebrates freedom without defining it, and he dodges any serious engagement with the social, cultural, and moral incongruities arising from the pursuit of actually existing freedom. A believer for whom God remains dauntingly inscrutable might view the president’s confident explication of the Creator’s purpose to be at the very least presumptuous, if not altogether blasphemous.

Still, one must acknowledge that in his second inaugural address, as in other presentations he has made, President Bush succeeds quite masterfully in capturing something essential about the way Americans see themselves and their country. Here is a case where myths and delusions combine to yield perverse yet important truths.

Reinhold Niebuhr helps us appreciate the large hazards embedded in those myths and delusions. Four of those truths merit particular attention at present: 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.

The first 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, writes 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—as it seems likely that George W. Bush believes today—that this covenant with God marked America as a new Israel.

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As a chosen people possessing what Niebuhr refers 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 observes 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 writes, 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. We see them in the way that President Bush, certain of the purity of U.S. intentions in Iraq, shrugs off responsibility for the calamitous consequences ensuing from his decision to invade that country. We see them also in the way that the administration insists that Abu Ghraib or the policy of secret rendition that delivers suspected terrorists into the hands of torturers in no way compromises U.S. claims of support for human rights and the rule of law.

It follows that only cynics or scoundrels would dare suggest that more sordid considerations might have influenced the American choice for war or that incidents like Abu Ghraib signify something other than simply misconduct by a handful of aberrant soldiers. As Niebuhr writes, when we swathe ourselves in self-regard, it’s but a short step to concluding that “only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions”—an insight that goes far to explain the outrage expressed by senior U.S. officials back in 2003 when “Old Europe” declined to endorse the war.

In Niebuhr’s view, America’s rise to power derived less from divine favor than from good fortune combined with a fierce determination to convert that good fortune into wealth and power. The good fortune—Niebuhr refers to it as “America, rocking in the cradle of its continental security”—came in the form of a vast landscape, rich in resources, ripe for exploitation, and insulated from the bloody cockpit of power politics. The determination found expression in a strategy of commercial and territorial expansionism that proved staggeringly successful, evidence not of superior virtue but of shrewdness punctuated with a considerable capacity for ruthlessness.

In describing America’s rise to power Niebuhr does not shrink from using words like “hegemony” and “imperialism.” His point is not to tag the United States with responsibility for the world’s evils. Rather, it is to suggest that we do not differ from other great powers as much as we imagine. On precisely this point he cites John Adams with considerable effect. “Power,” observes Adams,

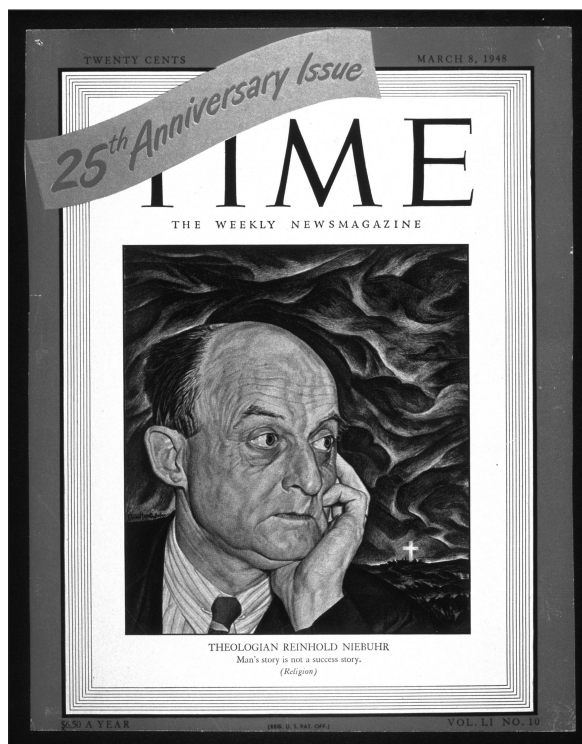
“always thinks it has a great soul and vast views beyond the comprehension of the weak; and that it is doing God’s service when it is violating all His laws.”

Niebuhr has little patience for those who portray the United States as acting on God’s behalf. In that regard, the religiosity that seemingly forms such a durable element of the American national identity has a problematic dimension. “All men are naturally inclined to obscure the morally ambiguous element in their political cause by investing it with religious sanctity,” observes Niebuhr in an article that appeared in the magazine *Christianity and Crisis*. “This is why religion is more frequently a source of confusion than of light in the political realm.” In the United States, he continues, “The tendency to equate our political with our Christian convictions causes politics to generate idolatry.” The emergence of evangelical conservatism as a force in American politics, which Niebuhr did not live to see, has only reinforced this tendency.

Niebuhr anticipated that the American veneration of liberty could itself degenerate into a form of idolatry. He cautions that “no society, not even a democratic one, is great enough or good enough to make itself the final end of human existence.” Niebuhr’s skepticism on this

point does not imply that he was anti-democratic. However, Niebuhr evinced an instinctive aversion to anything that smacked of utopianism, and he saw in the American creed a susceptibility to the utopian temptation. In the early phases of the Cold War, he provocatively suggests that “the evils against which we contend are frequently the fruits of illusions which are similar to our own.”

Although Niebuhr was referring to the evils of Communism, his comment applies equally to the present, when the United States contends against the evils of Islamic radicalism. Osama bin Laden is a genuinely evil figure; George W. Bush merely misguided. Yet each of these two protagonists subscribes to



The man himself

Getty

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all-encompassing, albeit entirely opposite, illusions. Each is intent on radically changing the Middle East, the former by ejecting the West and imposing *Sharia* law, the latter by defeating “the terrorists” and imprinting modernity. Neither will succeed, although in the meantime they engage in an unintended collaboration that does enormous mischief—a perfect illustration of what Niebuhr once referred to as the “hidden kinship between the vices of even the most vicious and the virtues of even the most upright.”

For Niebuhr, the tendency to sanctify American political values and by extension U.S. policy was anathema. Tossing aside what he calls “the garnish of sentiment and idealism” or “the halo of moral sanctity,” he summons us today to disenthral ourselves from the self-aggrandizing parable to which President Bush refers when he alludes to America’s “great liberating tradition.” To purport that this tradition either explains or justifies the U.S. presence in Iraq is to engage in self-deception.

Although politics may not be exclusively or entirely a quest for power, considerations of power are never absent from politics. Niebuhr understood that. He cherished democracy, but saw it as “a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems.” Its purpose is as much to constrain as to liberate. “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible,” he writes; “but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.” Borrowing a phrase from John Dewey, he reminds us that “entrenched predatory self-interest” shapes the behavior of states. Even if unwilling to acknowledge that this axiom applies in full to the United States, 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 is 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.

Despite an abundance of evidence to the contrary, modern man, Niebuhr writes, clings to the view “that history is the record of the progressive triumph of good over evil.” In that regard, President Bush certainly fits the definition of a modern man. So too do those who announce that, with history having “ended,” plausible alternatives to democratic capitalism cannot exist, who declare categor-

ically that globalization will determine the future of the international system, or who prattle on about America's supposed "indispensability" as the sole remaining superpower. All of these deep thinkers fall prey to what Niebuhr describes as "the inclination of wise men to imagine that their wisdom has exhausted the infinite possibilities of God's power and wisdom." The limits of their own imagination define the putative limits of what lies ahead—a perspective that, as we learned on September 11, 2001, serves only to set the observer up for a nasty surprise.

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 modesty in forecasting what is still to come. Yet as Niebuhr writes, "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 particularly short supply in present-day Washington. There, especially among neoconservatives and neoliberals, the conviction persists that Americans are called on to serve, in Niebuhr's most memorable phrase, "as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection." For the past six years Americans have been engaged in one such tutorial. After 9/11, the Bush administration announced its intention of bringing freedom and democracy to the people of the Islamic world. Ideologues within the Bush administration, egged on by pundits and policy analysts, persuaded themselves that American power, adroitly employed, could transform the Greater Middle East, with the invasion of Iraq intended to jumpstart that process. The results speak for themselves. Indeed, events have now progressed far enough to permit us to say, with Niebuhr, that in Iraq "the paths of progress" have turned out "to be more devious and unpredictable than the putative managers of history could understand."

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

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words, that “The 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. Americans 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.” In the aftermath of 9/11, an administration enamored with military might insisted on the necessity of using force to eliminate the putative threat represented by Saddam Hussein. The danger that he posed was growing day by day. A showdown had become unavoidable. To delay further was to place at risk the nation’s very survival. Besides, as one Washington insider famously predicted, a war with Iraq was sure to be a “cakewalk.” These were the arguments mustered in 2002 and 2003 to persuade Americans—and the rest of the world—that preventive war had become necessary, justifiable, and even inviting.

A half-century earlier, Reinhold Niebuhr had encountered similar arguments. The frustrations of the early Cold War combined with the knowledge of U.S. nuclear superiority to produce calls for preventive war against the Soviet Union. In one fell swoop, advocates of attacking Russia argued, the United States could eliminate its rival and achieve permanent peace and security. In Niebuhr’s judgment, the concept of preventive war fails both normatively and pragmatically. It is not only morally wrong; it is also stupid. “So long as war has not broken out, we still have the possibility of avoiding it,” he said. “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 twentieth 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 knaves and fools got their war, which has yielded not the neat and tidy outcome promised, but a host of new complications. Even so, the president has shown no inclination to reconsider his endorsement of preventive war. The Bush Doctrine remains on the books and Congress has not insisted on its abrogation. Given what the imple-

mentation of this doctrine has produced in Iraq, Niebuhr would certainly have viewed its survival as both remarkable and deeply troubling.

Finally, there is the imperative of appreciating the limits of power, for Niebuhr the very foundation of sound statecraft. Perhaps the most disconcerting passage Niebuhr ever wrote is this one, from 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 \$9 trillion), the trade imbalance (surpassing \$800 billion last year), and the level of oil imports (exceeding 60 percent of daily requirements). A large gap is opening up between the professed 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 to 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.

“The greater danger,” Niebuhr worried 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.”

Rather than engaging in vain attempts to remake places like Iraq in our own image, the United States would be better served if it focused on creating a stable global order, preferably one that avoids the chronic barbarism that characterized

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the previous century. During the run-up to the Iraq War, senior members of the Bush administration repeatedly expressed their disdain for mere stability. Since March 2003, they have acquired a renewed appreciation for its benefits. The education has come at considerable cost—more than 3,800 American lives and several hundred billion dollars so far.

Niebuhr did not disdain stability. Given the competitive nature of politics and the improbability (and undesirability) of any single nation achieving genuine global dominion, he posited “a tentative equilibrium of power” as the proper goal of U.S. policy. Among other things, he wrote, nurturing that equilibrium might afford the United States with “an opportunity to make our wealth sufferable to our conscience and tolerable to our friends.” Yet efforts to establish such an equilibrium by fiat would surely fail. Creating and maintaining a balance of power requires finesse and flexibility, locating “the point of concurrence between the parochial and the general interest, between the national and the international common good.” This, in a nutshell, writes Niebuhr, composes “the art of statecraft.”

During the Cold War, within the Western camp at least, the United States enjoyed considerable success in identifying this point of concurrence. The resulting strategy of containment, which sought equilibrium, not dominance, served the economic and security interests of both the United States and its allies. As a result, those allies tolerated and even endorsed American primacy. The United States was the unquestioned leader of the Free World. As long as Washington did not mistake leadership as implying a grant of arbitrary authority, the United States remained first among equals.

After 9/11, the Bush administration rejected mere equilibrium as a goal. Rather than searching for a mutually agreeable point of concurrence, which implies a willingness to give and take, President Bush insisted on calling the shots. He demanded unquestioning conformity, famously declaring, “You are either with us or against us.” Niebuhr once observed that the wealth and power of the United States presented “special temptations to vanity and arrogance which militate against our moral prestige and authority.” In formulating their strategy for the global war on terror, President Bush and his lieutenants succumbed to that temptation.

The results have not been pretty. Hitherto reliable allies have become unreliable. Washington’s capacity to lead has eroded. The moral standing of the United States has all but collapsed. In many parts of the world, American wealth and power have come to seem intolerable. The Bush record represents the very inverse of what Niebuhr defined as successful statecraft.

This is not to suggest that restoring realism and effectiveness to U.S. foreign policy is simply a matter of reviving the habits and routines to which Washington adhered from the late 1940s through the 1980s. The East-West dichotomies that defined that era have vanished and the United States today is not the country that it was in the days of Harry Truman or Dwight Eisenhower. The difficult challenges facing the United States require us to go forward, not backward. 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 *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, American 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, he continued, 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 ameliorated 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

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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 point 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 correlations between expansionism and prosperity, national power and individual freedom have begun to unravel. Since 2003 and the beginning of the Iraq War, it has become almost entirely undone.

By no means least of all, our adherence to a strategy of expansionism 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 profligacy, 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.

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. The political elite, the gov-

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erning 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 concludes *The Irony of American History*. Should the United States perish, the prophet writes,

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 an inscription 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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