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NIEBUHR'S CONCEPTION OF POLITICS IN THE UNITED STATES AND THE WORLD

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Reinhold Niebuhr's conception of politics is not based on a comprehensive and coherent overall theory, nor is it a systematic approach to social systems or political behavior. Indeed, there is an air of self-mockery in his description of his approach as "bastardized theology"—and, by implication, "bastardized political theory." He was concrete in his thinking, intent on understanding reality, and wedded to political history. His stance was often polemical, bent on demolishing a questionable viewpoint, exposing hypocrisy, or laying bare illusions, but he was as relentless in pursuing his own illusions as those of others.

There was movement to Niebuhr's thought and, as June Bingham has shown, the ability to change his views, yet those views were still firmly based on principles too simple for some, too illusive for others, and too provisionally stated to satisfy those who seek for "hard theories." He was skeptical of rigid and rationalistic modes and approaches which did not correspond to historical reality, and his principles did not fit readily and simply into the conventional categories and groupings of political thought. He struggled to take hold of reality, not to force it prematurely into any ready-made ideological mold.

The New Left and the New Theologues have pictured him as an establishment thinker and apologist for the status quo. Does this fit the founding editor of *Radical Religion*? His style of political analysis, with its emphasis on the complexities and ambiguities of political choice, is said to lead to political passivity and indifference to the needs of the city. How many of his critics have run for Congress, as he did (he was a Socialist candidate in 1930), were founders of such organizations as Americans for Democratic Action, and fought for their goals over the years?

Some conservatives condemn Niebuhr as an unreconstructed liberal. Have they read his critique of liberalism? He was for peace but against pacifism; for dialogue across ideological and national boundaries but skeptical of UNESCO because he questioned Huxley's scientific rationalism as a universal answer to world peace; for war against Nazism but for accommodation with the Soviet Union; and for containment in Europe but not in Southeast Asia.

How quaint and far-removed he seems from almost every one of the approaches popular in the last decade: positive thinking, problem-solving, giving the system one more chance, banning the bomb, ending the war, black power, law and order, the "conquest" of hunger or disease, "elimination" of waste, "resolution" of conflict. He strove to

solve problems, to root out evil, and to extend opportunity and justice, but neither his personal nor his public philosophy allowed him to strut and pose as a savior of mankind. He never saw himself as a leader sent to eradicate evil, for he found too much frailty in all men, beginning with himself (although his humility was never self-conscious or pompous, as it is with those who make a display of their limitations). His self-awareness and identity-seeking was a personal matter, not something sold for a price at a lecture or literary fashion show. It was *man's* predicament and *man's* possibilities, not Reinhold Niebuhr's, which stimulated the articles and sermons and books that he published in torrents almost until his death.

Niebuhr's concepts and principles were based on experience, not meditation in solitude. He moved from the pulpit of a contentious Detroit parish to the cockpit of social and religious controversy in New York, then the world's largest city. Two forces in particular repeatedly drew him out into society and drew him away from systematic thought. He was impatient with what he considered the irrelevance of philosophical systems, on one hand, and with society's stubborn resistance to change and its sanctification of the status quo on the other hand. He could not avoid the political maelstrom, though he early learned that problems were never solved once and for all. He might have agreed with the words of Walt Whitman: "it is provided in the very essence of things that from any fruition of success, no matter what, shall come forth something to make a greater struggle necessary."

Niebuhr entered the political arena not as a political actor but as a political thinker, with all the burdens and constraints this entailed. If theologians and philosophers questioned the seriousness of his pursuit of theology or philosophy, politicians and diplomatists doubted that he was one of them, and they were right. They were uneasy in his presence—a favorite comment was "I don't understand what he's talking about." I know of at least two Secretaries of State whose most costly blunders occurred from their failure to consider Niebuhr's admonition on the limits of power. His one attempt to gain political office ended in failure in 1930: he lived in two worlds, that of politics and that of the mind, never fully at home in either. Perhaps this is why he understood inhabitants of both worlds better than they understood themselves, including their self-deceptions and pretensions, their interests and illusions, although his skepticism and self-critical attitude with respect to principles and policies may have cost him friends and allies. In the 1920s and 1930s, when he was affiliated with followers of the social gospel, he questioned whether Christians were a likely source of social reform, given the religious complacency of Detroit, and quoted with approval the words of the Episcopal bishop Charles Williams that on matters of social justice there were only two Christians in Detroit, and they were both Jews. His indignation focused on

the role of Henry Ford I and the mighty leaders of the new mass production auto industry, and in challenging them he was defying the most influential and powerful people in that city. He continued along this path even when his acceptance by influential leaders grew and he did not hesitate to challenge the illusions of John Foster Dulles, Henry Luce or Billy Graham. Niebuhr's social criticism, however, was criticism with a difference. To achieve his ends he needed the support of those who held power, but quest for influence and power can tie the hands and restrict the freedom of social thinkers, especially those who would be both thinkers and doers; thinkers who make no pretense of influencing the powerful are immune, for all out social critics and muckrakers have no designs on decision-makers nor are they dependent upon them.

Niebuhr, by contrast, carried his thinking into the marketplace. He numbered among a few close friends and many acquaintances the powerful and the mighty in government, business, education, and the mass media, yet from his first denunciation of social injustices in Detroit to his rather shrill debates with Henry Luce and John Foster Dulles over America's role in the world, he never flinched from meeting the powerful head on. He criticized the notion of "house theologian," as he saw in the late 1960's the relationship of Billy Graham to the White House, not only as an abridgement of the historic American separation of church and state but, more important, as raising, like every form of subservience to holders of power, the specter of the social observer abandoning his independence as critic and interpreter. He retained, however, his commitment to both thinking and doing, and thus his conception of politics evolved.

THREE CONCEPTS IN A THEORY OF POLITICS

Niebuhr's thinking evolved into a more or less coherent outlook on political problems. As an alternative to system-building in the social sciences, he proposed the study of history, which, he believed, remained more open to empirical data, and he did evolve a theory of ethics and politics which provided a basis for a serious dialogue with ethicists (whom he criticized for being too utopian) and political realists (whom he sometimes found too cynical).

Niebuhr's conception of United States and world politics rested essentially on three working principles which he applied consistently in most of his political writings. These concepts are power, community, and practical morality.

Power

"The contest of power . . . is the heart of political life."¹ Niebuhr wrote: "To understand politics is to recognize the elements of power which underlie all social structure . . . which may be obscured or submerged, but which cannot be eliminated."² Whatever the ultimate goals or claims men and nations pursue, the means to both their immediate ends and their ultimate ends is power. Indeed, "there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation."³

Power for Niebuhr was both an inevitable component of politics and an inescapable source of corruption. Anxiety and insecurity are at the roots of the quest for power and of the excuses men make for their aggressions on the basis of morality every day of their lives. Man who is dependent upon God but seeks to make himself self-sufficient and independent must inevitably be anxious. To end this anxiety, he seeks influence, recognition, and power, thereby threatening others and bringing anxiety into their lives. One man's power is another man's powerlessness, one man's security another's insecurity. The existence of power and powerlessness, security and insecurity, is not openly nor plainly stated but is cloaked in the language of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and "reasons of state." Rivalries such as these among nations are also played out in microcosm, Niebuhr writes, as when "my little five-year-old boy comes to me with the tale of an attack made upon him by his year-old sister. This tale is concocted to escape parental judgment for being too rough in playing with his sister. One is reminded of Germany's claim that Poland was the aggressor and the similar Russian charge against Finland [in World War II]."⁴

Community

As men struggle for identity and security in their relationships, they also join together out of convergent interests and common purposes. Community exists at almost every level, from the most intimate and enduring units such as the family to ever larger groupings of states. Community precedes government, and government cannot be established where community is not present, as we have seen in the attempts toward world government. Community was approximated when

¹ "Leaves from the Notebook of a War-bound American," *Christian Century*, Vol 56, November 15, 1939, p. 1405.

² *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 123.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

the states of western Europe and the United States discovered the basis for common action in a convergence of political and moral interests following World War II. This convergence of interests was lacking in the Cold War, partly because the East did not share the moral consensus prevailing in Europe and the United States, and partly because (at least in Niebuhr's time) the political interests of East and West did not converge.

Community, then, involves a modicum of shared values and some minimal agreement on political means and ends. It is the framework within which the give and take of politics and accommodation is possible. When society is based primarily on fear, nations huddle together on the most tentative and provisional basis in the face of the threat, say, of a thermonuclear holocaust. Community provides the cement for at least limited cooperation among states, as the power/security dilemma leads to rivalry for influence and prestige. It may be too simple to juxtapose power and community in these terms, yet for Niebuhr the two were interconnected and provide the fulcrum of his thought.

American political life has gone on within a framework of shared values which is at least partly the heritage of a common European tradition. The Founding Fathers wrote of forming not a political union of states but a more perfect union, implying the existence of a prior moral and political community. World politics is plagued by the absence of such a community: only for limited periods and in limited geographical areas is community approximated on this wider basis. Relations between nations more often resemble proceedings in the course of an armistice among contending states than they do a discussion of common interests.

Practical Morality

A final concept which reached fruition in the later stages of Niebuhr's work was the argument that practical morality may be the highest possible attainment in national and international politics. Moral and political choices involve discrimination among many goods; they are concrete choices, not abstract ones. Men seek to do the right, but what is right? It is hard to perceive the correct solution for a problem or the right course to take in a given situation, but it is equally hard to perceive the interests and moral positions of others. Fear, insecurity, and the quest for power as a means of security and identity further compound the problem. To these must be added ignorance, the uncertainties of predicting the consequences of every moral choice, the hazards of premature moral judgments and the self-righteousness of individuals and groups.

At the national level, Niebuhr believed, these problems are further complicated by the human tendency to project upon the state un-

fulfilled personal ambitions and aspirations, a prime cause for the crusading nature of contemporary nationalism: the more insecure and anxious men feel in their personal lives, he said, the more they turn to national achievements for personal satisfactions. Added to all this is the fact that moral choices are made more difficult because of the complexities of modern life. The ancient and enduring moral codes were drawn up for rather simple societies and ways of life (as Chester Barnard wrote, they come from a time of sheep and shepherds), for societies marked by a considerable degree of moral consensus which no longer exists. Given all these complexities and problems, those who offer moral guidance tend to take one of five positions.

The Moralists

The moralists would make every question, however limited and practical (for example, whether to grant a travel visa or not), a pure moral issue. Confronted with the complex and ambiguous choices of statecraft, they defer true moral choice to the millenium. Morality becomes a matter of declaring or awaiting a perfectionist goal, not a matter of making choices among lesser evils or of the least imperfect good among available moral choices. Moralists tend to scorn those who make present choices. Niebuhr throughout his career attacked this approach and appears for contemporary societies at least to reject it outright.

The Cynics

The opposite of moralism is cynicism, which maintains, in effect, that moral choice is impossible, that men cover their acts with moral and ideological rationalizations when ambition and self-interest are in fact the true determinants. Thus cynics call for recognizing what *is*, not what ought to be. Niebuhr believed that cynicism had little to commend it as a positive and constructive approach to moral decisions.

The Pragmatists

Pragmatism appeals to those who are impatient with broad and general moral viewpoints. The pragmatist grapples with reality solely on a case-by-case basis: each decision has to be made as if it were unique, and the effective policy-maker cannot afford to see it in relation to other decisions. James Reston criticized President Nixon for such an approach—for looking at every issue as if it were isolated from every other one, and Presidents Kennedy and Johnson have been similarly criticized. In fact, says Niebuhr, every issue and problem is interconnected, and there is often a better chance of making the right moral

choice if decisions are viewed in this way. However, although pragmatism is an advance over cynicism, it remains for Niebuhr a plausible but inadequate approach.

THE POLITICAL REALISTS AND PRACTICAL MORALISTS

Two other traditions have respected histories, political realism and practical morality. Niebuhr moved back and forth between the two throughout his writings and speeches. Realism has its place because moral choices in politics can never be made in isolation from practical interests. Practical morality is relevant because political choices which would be moral must consider competing moral claims. Both realism and prudence are essential to moral choice, the one in evaluating competing political claims and the other in evaluating moral claims.

Some may say these are distinctions without a difference, and that what counts in practice are those frequent decisions which are made with seemingly little influence from underlying philosophies. Yet the success of our foreign policy over the next five or ten years may well depend upon whether policy-makers substitute realism or prudence for pragmatism or cynicism. Pragmatism looks to what is possible and practical in a single isolated case, while prudence seeks to balance what is politically possible with what is conceived of as being at least morally right and subjects political decisions to some kind of hierarchy of values. While neither principles nor circumstances alone can tell us what is right, they do make up the fabric of moral choice. General principles, which seldom (if ever) decide concrete cases, do provide a framework for moral reasoning, and circumstances influence priorities among values, especially as we leave an era of plenty (one set of circumstances) and enter an era of scarcity (another circumstance).

A nation cannot do everything; its leaders must choose. One choice must be to select methods of assuring national and international security. Most of the energy of the Nixon administration (and perhaps of the Johnson administration) was dedicated to this task. If collective security is dead, what are we to put in its place? Because of excessive pragmatism, both these administrations were more effective in coping with individual crises as they developed than in dealing with the larger general question. However, pragmatists suffer most by comparison with practical moralists with respect to the problems of the developing world. Here neither charity nor crash programs are the answer, nor is the massive transfer of capital or people. Western policies toward so-called Third World problems are likely to remain peripheral to the central issues of negotiating with the Russians and the Chinese for some time, and those who espouse economic and social development programs as panaceas for world peace need to be reminded that their concerns are not yet at the center of world atten-

tion. Yet somehow future policy-makers who would be both realistic and prudent must help to move these issues somewhat closer to the center of the action. From the standpoint of practical morality, there is something obscene about worrying over Great-Power problems 99 percent of the time while paying homage to a new structure of peace only once or twice a year at the United Nations when the leaders of nations' gather in New York for the opening of the General Assembly.

To be more specific, critics of the Nixon-Kissinger strategy, perpetuated by Mr. Nixon's successor, note a seeming obliviousness to the more intangible aspects of foreign policy. The United States, these critics say, has been both ruthless and short-sighted in abandoning its friends Japan, India, and Taiwan. It has used its power with little magnanimity or grace. Kissinger and his allies seem to have lacked the personal self-confidence and security necessary to establish and maintain individual relations of intimacy and trust with Europeans and Asians. Their pragmatism has been so relentless and cold-blooded that their intentions have been suspect even (and especially) among those one might expect to be most trusting of Americans, namely, the Europeans.

The trouble with pragmatism is that, much like every other foreign policy pattern, it can be expanded into a religion. Where human vanity plays a controlling role, limited political precepts and tactics can be transformed into absolutes—and there has been plenty of vanity in the Nixon-Kissinger approach. Secrecy becomes not a means for accomplishing certain ends but an end in itself, justified not by doctrine or words but by a sense of omniscience and self-righteousness which is impervious to alternatives. Such pragmatism, though less offensive than the florid public moralism of John Foster Dulles, is nonetheless all-pervasive in its effects. It leads to isolation from other views, ruthlessness in dealing with those who differ, and unwillingness to acknowledge that one may be wrong. Those whose acts spring from self-righteousness, even though they do not speak in its language, may be the most self-righteous of all.

We can assume that Niebuhr would have reflected upon the present-day conduct of foreign policy in terms of practical morality, although the thoughts on pragmatism just outlined cannot, obviously, be attributed to him. Likewise, it is fair to suppose he would have approached the Soviet-American efforts toward *detente* with an awareness of the importance of community and moral consensus—or lack thereof. It is also unlikely that he would have approached any problem without careful consideration of the problem of power. His legacy is not that of a pundit or prophet, however, but it is rather his concepts and their usefulness in studying those issues which as a basis for study and thought remain the unfinished business of American political and international life.