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Reinhold Niebuhr and the War on Terrorism

Daniel Rohrer

America's response to the terrorist attacks of last September is marked by nationalistic pride and the assurance from our President that the cause is just. In our political, military, and economic actions against other nations, especially Afghanistan, we assert our concepts of democracy and capitalism, purporting to make the world safe for the freedom that flows from these systems. From a religious standpoint, we are armed with two weapons: civil religion that veils the government's actions in biblical language, and prophetic work by men like Jerry Falwell. One needs to look back only forty years in American history to find Reinhold Niebuhr, a figure who conceives of American religion and the role of the prophet more vividly than anyone today.

Applying Niebuhr's thought to the current anti-terrorist mania in the United States is useful in two ways: providing concrete illustrations of Niebuhr's theoretical moves and aiding a critique of the government's sometimes fanatical stance. The enemies whom Niebuhr condemned in the bulk of his writings were communist Russia and its allies, yet he did not allow this condemnation to limit his polemics against the complacency of American consumer culture and self-righteousness. While his critiques remain relevant (if they have not become more so), his writings on communism have lost much of the meaning that they formerly held, insofar as America now conceives of communism as being one of the smaller threats to democracy. Yet the way in which he makes his critique of communism still serves as a responsible, realistic model for addressing America's relationship to the rest of the world, especially in terms of our terrorist witch-hunt.

Before proceeding, some clarification of the term “witch-hunt” is necessary, since I have chosen it intentionally but feel that it could be misconstrued. In one sense the government's response to last year's events is entirely appropriate; our nation needs to make some action to ensure the safety of our citizens. Indeed, Niebuhr's thought makes provision even for violence in the struggle of nation versus nation, distinguishing him from many of the pacifists then and now. However, one cannot make theological excuses for the scapegoat techniques of certain national leaders, such as Attorney General John Ashcroft.(1) America's response to these terrorist threats is quite similar to its dealings with communism during the Cold War. A legitimate threat exists, but a number of leaders take reactionary, zealous stances, creating threats where none exist or attributing real threats to the scapegoat of the time. When coupled with a sense of national self-righteousness, such governmental actions resemble not necessary foreign policy but a witch-hunt, the supposed extermination of something that does not exist.

America's sense of self-righteousness in world affairs is nothing new. Niebuhr's project in The Irony of American History (1952) is to point out the illusions America fostered during his time with regards to its own righteousness, derived from its self-appointment as the new Promised Land, Zion, or any number of appropriated biblical terms. This analysis is relevant to our current stance on terrorism. He criticizes America's cheap virtue while continuing to value the ideals America tries to embody, however irresponsibly: the inclusive community described in the Bible and the democracy that has not emerged enough from theory into practice. His most telling summary of the United States follows directly after a beautiful passage about Christianity's applicability to our attempts at achievements in history, to which I will turn in several paragraphs. Thus Niebuhr juxtaposes the success and complacency of America with God's completion of our incomplete endeavors:

The irony of America's quest for happiness lies in the fact that she succeeded more obviously than any other nation in making life "comfortable," only finally to run into larger incongruities of human destiny by the same achievements by which it escaped the smaller ones. Thus we tried too simply to make sense out of life, striving for harmonies between man and nature and man and society and man and his ultimate destiny, which have provisional but no ultimate validity.(2)

This passage highlights two of the major themes in Niebuhr's thought. First, he emphasizes the way in which material goods give a false sense of security. Our provisional escape from discomfort led only to being unprepared to face life's "larger incongruities," such as the problems America had in addressing communism. Second, he insists that making sense of life's big issues and life itself is a complex undertaking. Niebuhr is never one to offer simple, cheap
solutions or criticisms. There is always an attempt to wrestle with diverse viewpoints and multiple causes. These ideas cast doubt on America's easy self-righteousness in addressing terrorism while simultaneously exposing the frailty of many of the criticisms of America's anti-terrorism. One such criticism comes from Stanley Fish, the famous Miltonist, in the July 2002 issue of Harper's. His criticism is interesting in that it asserts “The Ignorance of Our Warrior Intellectuals,” America’s professors, but seems to vindicate their petty attempts (Fish’s included) at speaking about America’s response to terrorism; therefore I will return to Fish's article later, to illustrate the way in which many America thinkers have failed to see the governmental and economic causes of the terrorist attacks.

Niebuhr would serve as a classic example of a public intellectual with a grasp on the complexities of public life, should America’s thinkers choose to engage him. His condemnation of America's complacency flows from his biblical convictions, drawing heavily on the prophetic tradition. His views of human nature as complex, thus complicating individual and collective strivings for the good, are subsumed under God's transcendent meaning and completion of man's endeavors, in both the present and the future. God made man in His image, yet man's sin confounds any hopes of perfection in this world. Especially in collectives, man does not have much hope of overcoming his creaturely limitations; nothing he does is ever morally pure, in accordance with his ideals, or least of all simple. Thinkers like Wilfred McClay, in his Niebuhrian analysis in the February 2002 issue of First Things, attempt to do justice to the apparently dual nature of humanity as set forth in Niebuhr’s thought: the idealistic notion of being a child of God and the realistic understanding of man as sinner. McClay does not understand that Niebuhr offered this view of man as an alternative to the overly optimistic one that the Social Gospel offered. In addition, focusing on Niebuhr’s doctrine of man instead of his economic and political critiques, McClay shows that he does not understand the true depth of Niebuhr’s critique of America. The nation’s self-righteousness is so deep that Niebuhr would have no choice but to condemn such actions as the bombing of Afghanistan. The fact that he would have understood why America makes the anti-terrorism choices it makes does not mean that he would have excused those choices.

McClay would have done better to examine Niebuhr’s thoughts on a situation similar to our current War on Terrorism: the Vietnam Conflict. In an interview during the last years of his life, Niebuhr showed his disdain for America’s police action: “I would say the debacle of Viet Nam is the ultimate symbol of the general failure. For instance, the involvement in Viet Nam was motivated by a utopian idea of democracy and freedom for the whole world and by a simple anti-Communism.” This critique cuts to the core of American pretension. America is hardly innocent of utopian democratic ideals today, or of having a simple anti-terrorism. Therefore it is clear that Niebuhr, while understanding the motivation to stamp out terrorism against America, would not have excused America’s illusions about the utopian necessity or simplicity of this task.

McClay quotes Niebuhr’s eloquent passage regarding the relevance of Christian tenets to the realm of public endeavors, individual and collective. This is the passage that directly precedes Niebuhr’s condemnation of America’s “comfortable” lifestyle. His understanding of Christianity places political endeavors, like America’s terrorist policy, in a more ultimate context, suggesting a more ideal way of addressing terrorism. Whether America is able to more fully embody this ideal remains to be seen, but Niebuhr’s Christian formulation of the problem is comprehensive:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

How applicable these words are to events occurring almost exactly fifty years after Niebuhr wrote them! Clause by clause they criticize America’s stance against terrorism. “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime,” especially a task as large as eradicating terrorism. “Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history” ; hence we make sense out of the ugly, evil, violent business of persecuting and dismantling other nations. “Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone,” so we seek the help of stronger nations and coerce weaker nations into complicity in our less-than-virtuous task. Finally, most importantly, comes this sobering reminder: “No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint.” We have been drunk on the notion of our righteousness in fighting terrorism; while this may be a noble task, the means by which we achieve our end are flawed and filled with our own pride. Our allies do not share our zeal, and certainly our foes
do not see the virtue in bombing innocent Afghans. Niebuhr’s words, written so long ago, accuse the Bush administration of what was for Niebuhr the foremost sin, pride. Rather than resorting to the violence that flows from our flawed ideals, we should find recourse in hope, faith, love, and forgiveness. The incompleteness of our earthly existence could mean that violence remains necessary, but perhaps it would stay our hand when we consider killing our innocent neighbors.

Yet these Christian tenets do not serve as the basis for public policy – indeed, they should not. Niebuhr sets these ideas up as ideals, the ultimate goods that cannot find embodiment in this world, either in individuals or governments. This notion cuts two ways. On the one hand, it means that hope, faith, love, and forgiveness cannot translate directly into foreign policy or any other tool at the government’s disposal. Niebuhr argues, for example, that love would be an irresponsible attribute for a government to possess, lest that love become the accomplice of tyranny; a certain degree of hardheadedness is necessary in the political sphere. On the other hand, ideals serve to dispel our illusions about our own virtue. Transcendent ideals that the world’s nations cannot embody serve as the standard to which we cannot compare, so we should not confuse our own government’s actions with ideal actions. No government can exact perfect justice; therefore our attempts at calling our policies just are pretension only. This means that aligning the War on Terrorism with a sense of Christian justice is incorrect to the point of being dangerous; only seeing our inability to exact perfect justice will give us a realistic picture of what we should be doing.

This tense balance drives Niebuhr’s thoroughgoing critique of American pride, the potency of which Stanley Fish cannot match from his more secular, postmodern standpoint. These two features of Fish’s standpoint would not even be worth a mention if he did not make them “such issues” – indeed, the central issues – in his analysis of September 11, 2001. It does not take an intellectual to see that the targets of the terrorist attacks, the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, are the ultimate symbols of American dominance, economic and governmental. It does take an intellectual, however, to force the meaning of these attacks into a dimension that engages Fish’s views on postmodernism and religion. In fairness to Fish, he was not the one who originally cast the terrorist attacks in the light of postmodernism; he cites articles from The New York Times, The Chicago Tribune, and Time as the originators of this debate. However, he continues the debate, a debate that is relevant only to intellectuals. Fish asserts the separation of the private and public spheres as a good and uniquely American innovation, a normative assertion that would better serve as a description. Anyone who accepts a version of Christianity that is too imminent or too transcendent must agree with Fish when he says, “Let’s obey the civil, nonsectarian laws and leave the sorting out of big theological questions to God and eternity.” What America is left with is a civil religion that is ill equipped to handle any problem beyond those of individual spirituality.

In light of Niebuhr’s approach to the public sphere, however, such a statement appears glib and dismissive of pressing problems. Adhering to a prophetic faith means embracing the tension between our actions and ideal actions, and using that tension to more closely approximate Christian ideals. For nations, this means working toward the visions of inclusive community that the Bible describes: the City of God and the Kingdom of God. As Niebuhr says, humanity should not strive for these inclusive communities through the means of the individual, like love; nations behave morally only when power is matched with power. Such an approach to politics necessitates attempts at understanding the complexities of the political sphere, not simply arguing for more love or the validity of postmodern intellectualism. The causes of the September attacks are governmental, economic, and cultural, most likely stemming from America’s dominance in the world arena, confounded by the globalization of capitalism. These are necessarily complex issues, preventing the simple criticism of postmodern intellectualism or the easy prophecy of Jerry Falwell, which I describe in the next section. Fish is highly remiss in failing to treat the global and economic causes of the terrorist attacks, though he is correct in condemning the generally inadequate response to the attacks by America’s intellectuals. Another facet of Niebuhr’s thought that is more useful than Fish’s analysis is his idea of power. As I have said, he sees the morality of nations, or the lack thereof, stemming from a balance of powers. During the Cold War, America’s power kept Russia in check and vice versa. Without the other to balance its power, either nation gaining the upper hand would leave that nation wide open to the temptation to pride, the chiefest sin in Niebuhr’s ethics. This situation, which is the reality in which America lives during our time, is the worst one that he could imagine for the moral health of a nation. Added to the materialism and complacency he perceived even in his time, America continually suffers from unchecked pride. There is little to keep America from doing whatever it pleases, and that is highly dangerous. It stands squarely in the way of integrating the world community. Even fifty years ago, Niebuhr sensed the ways in which the
world's nations were drawing closer to one another, primarily through technological means. In our time, world integration has grown through economic interdependence and the spread of democracy and capitalism. Technology and economics have necessitated the integration of the world community, something that has failed spectacularly in many respects. Eradicating terrorism is necessary for the health of the world community (though Niebuhr asserts that total integration is impossible), but the means by which America is attempting that eradication impede the strengthening of that community. Violence is often the only option, Niebuhr argues, but the better way to realize the goals of nation-states is through nonviolent means. So, while attempting one of the goals necessary for the world community, eradicating terrorism, the United States is jeopardizing the very community it wishes to save. This is because the United States clings to the obsolete notion that its way of going about things—a democratic republic with post-industrial market capitalism—is the way that everyone should go about things. While all people might be able to embrace the same or similar ideals, the means by which they attain those ideals does not need to be identical. Embracing the world community means accepting the diversity therein while working for common goals. In such a program there is little room for the violence that flows from naïve democratic utopianism.

Above all, we must remember that all nations and peoples are subject to the same God. That God cares just as much about the United States as it does about the Afghanis we bomb, meaning that the violence we do against our neighbors is violence against God's people. We are not the New Israel, God's new chosen people on a righteous mission; we are just another member of the world community. This is a notion that Americans feel religiously, in the inclusive tenets of Christianity and other religions, as well as socially, through economic interdependence and media integration. Such a sense of the inclusive community is not a new idea of Niebuhr's; he credits Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address as one of the more recent and important applications of this biblical notion. He frames the address in terms of American democracy versus communism, but his words ring eerily true in terms of the War on Terrorism.

We do, to be sure, face a problem which Lincoln did not face. We cannot say, "Both sides read the same Bible and pray to the same God." We are dealing with a conflict between contending forces which have no common presuppositions. But even in this situation it is very dangerous to define the struggle as one between a God-fearing and a godless civilization. The communists are dangerous not because they are god-

less but because they have a god... who, or which, sanctifies their aspiration and their power as identical with the ultimate purposes of life. We, on the other, as all "God-fearing" men of all ages, are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire. Even the most "Christian" civilization and even the most pious church must be reminded that the true God can be known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between divine and human purposes, even on the highest level of human aspirations. (8)

Our nation has begun to shed the quasi-religious notion that we are "One nation under God"—most likely because of our growing comfort with secularism and our growing distrust of religion. However, we have expressed the right sentiment for the wrong reasons: We are not one nation under God, because the violence we perpetrate against other nations proves that we have disavowed the knowledge that all nations exist under the same God. In doing so, we have abdicated the false mantle of being God's New Israel. Ridding ourselves of our religious pretensions is a good thing; throwing the baby out with the bathwater, however, is ridiculous. America must regain a sense of serving under the God who governs all of creation. This is the sense that Reinhold Niebuhr wished to instill in a sinful humanity, a sense that, unfortunately, has gone on unheard or misunderstood for fifty years.

Such an oversight may spring from America's unwillingness to understand criticism of its dearest systems, whether government, economics, individualism, sexual inequality, or racial prejudice. Niebuhr distinguishes himself from other prominent thinkers of the time by so effectively exposing the unexamined ideologies at work in America and the rest of the world. In this way he is almost the exact opposite of Jerry Falwell, who attempts to engage in the same prophetic role as Niebuhr but ultimately buys into the ideologies of the nation he tries to criticize. Rather than understanding the possible causes of the attacks, which must be very complex, Falwell saw the terrorist actions as an opportunity to voice his own prejudices, which are simplistically American. A discussion of these prejudices will benefit from a dialogue with several features of Niebuhr's thought, showing how the two men differ in their conceptions of the prophetic role. Niebuhr offers true criticism, wishing to better the culture he criticizes; Falwell merely articulates the prejudices that his white maleness affords him.

Commenting on the terrorist attacks, Falwell said that God had allowed the attacks to happen because of America's moral shortcomings. "The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this," he said. Because of the secular forces in America, which Falwell faults for allowing legal abortions, gay rights, and the prohibition of prayer in schools, God "lifted the curtain of protection" over America.

The issue that Falwell raises is that of the relationship between God and the workings of human history, the realm of prophecy. The prophetic task entails usually one person speaking about human affairs from God's perspective. Since human beings fall short of God's hopes for us, both as people and as nations, God's commentary on human affairs is overwhelmingly negative, but that negative commentary bears within it the hope of a better future if we work to resolve our present shortcomings. So far this seems to describe what Falwell is doing by denouncing homosexuals, feminists, and other non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual people. But the prophetic task is one in which Niebuhr engages as well, yet in an entirely different way. Both men have read the same scriptures but come up with different prophetic commentaries. Why?

One answer may be found in the issue of context. All of us have experienced firsthand the times in which Falwell operates, and have experienced the Reagan administration, increased commitments to civil rights, and the terrorist attacks that he discusses. Niebuhr's time grows foreign to us, since he died in 1971; selected biographical information, however, illustrates the issues that Niebuhr tackled in his time.(10) He distinguished himself from his contemporaries by breaking with the liberal tradition, using his Christianity to denounce Henry Ford's ostensibly fair treatment of his workers. This garnered him a position on Detroit's Interracial Committee, which proved to be an entry-point into secular politics and an assistant professorship at New York's Union Theological Seminary. Once in New York, Niebuhr flirted with socialist thought while denouncing Communism and facets of American politics and economics. These details alone show Niebuhr's engagement with corporations, political bodies, racial questions, religion, and academics. The same can be said of Falwell, but he often embodies or argues for the worst aspects of these structures, not challenging them to cleave to a higher standard, as Niebuhr did.

Examining the ideologies implied in Falwell's statements contrasts sharply with Niebuhr's prophetic writings. The most accessible distillations of Niebuhr's formidable bibliography are his collections of essays and sermons. One of his sermon-essays in particular, "The Biblical View: Moral Meaning and Moral Obscurities in History," from the book Faith and History, lends itself most readily to an explanation of three ways in which Falwell's statements run counter to Niebuhr's conception of the role of the prophet. They disagree in their discernment of God's relation to history, the targeting and timeliness of their prophecy, and the status of America as a nation that God protects with a "curtain." Running through Falwell's commentary is a sense of moral certainty and self-righteousness, the same kind I discussed in the previous section, as well as simplicity and an endorsement of America's most divisive values. Niebuhr's thought is steeped in the ambiguity of discerning God's judgment, doing justice to the complexity of both the prophetic task and the human existence it addresses.

Both men assert that the prophetic task posits God's relationship to human history, but they differ in their discernment of God's action in history. For Falwell, discernment is easy; he is quite sure that God sent us a clear message in the terrorist attacks, and that message was directed, in part, against the ACLU. For Niebuhr, discerning God's judgment is more ambiguous. God relates to human history, but humans are not able to discern God's purposes exactly, due to the obscure nature of human history.(11) So pointing to an historic event like last September's terrorist attacks and saying, "This is God's judgment," is wrong so long as there is absolute moral certainty. Niebuhr wants to hang on to the sense of God's transcendence, the notion that humans are too finite and history is too obscure to allow for self-righteous prophecy. While Falwell views history as equating one-to-one with God's judgment, Niebuhr doesn't think it's that easy, leaving some margin for human error. This is the same notion that Niebuhr suggests in terms of the incompleteness of our earthly existence, and our inability to live up to God's transcendent ideals that have imminent implications.

The second difference between these two men's prophecy is what they attack and when — or the timing and targeting of prophecy. Falwell spoke about God's judgment during a time of catastrophe, and made scapegoats out of marginal groups — the ones whom our society deems worthy of ridicule, torture, and death. In other words, he picked traditional, easy targets during a difficult time. Niebuhr's view takes the opposite approach, picking tough targets during times of ease. As I said earlier, Niebuhr attacked Henry Ford during a time when our society saw Ford and his business motives as noble, and when we enjoyed economic growth. In discussing his favorite prophet, Amos, Niebuhr reveals his own thoughts on the prophetic task: "The prophet Amos predicted judgement [sic] upon Israel not because he was able to weigh historical probabilities and arrive
at the conclusion that an historical catastrophe was impending. He made his prediction of doom in a period of political security and complacency."(12) This prophetic message is to attack the complacency of society exactly when it feels most comfortable. Falwell takes the easy way out, indicting sections of society for their morals. This misses the larger, structural problems, inside of which morals operate. He speaks against the corruption of structures – fallen structure that affect the whole society, not just segments thereof. One group’s moral strength or weakness is almost always rendered irrelevant in the face of corporate power, such as the way that the Ford Motor Company’s Indian religious fragmentation and consumerism in Detroit in the Thirties. Like Fish, Falwell misses the governmental and economic ramifications of the terrorist attacks, favoring a criticism that strokes his own biases. Though, after criticism from President Bush, Falwell apologized for the timing of his criticisms, he did not apologize for his choice of targets. The Times quotes Falwell as saying, "I apologize that, during a week when everyone appropriately dropped all labels and no one was seen as liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, religious or secular, I singled out for blame certain groups of Americans." (13) The Falwell was able to save face without retreating from his prejudices.

The last distinction I will draw concerns what Falwell calls the “curtain of protection” over America, which God lifted because of our supposed immorality. Here Falwell contrasts with a concept about which Niebuhr wrote explicitly and extensively, though fifty years before Falwell’s remark. Concerning the protection of America because of divine favor, Niebuhr turns to the prophet Jeremiah. Niebuhr argues that what seems to be Jeremiah’s simple prediction of Israel’s destruction at the hands of the rising Babylonian empire is actually a indictment of a culture that has grown too self-righteous. The Israelites, as God’s chosen people, believed that God would protect them because of that righteousness—they saw something similar to Falwell’s perceived “curtain.” This led to Israel thinking too highly of itself, leaving it vulnerable to hubris. (14) Niebuhr goes on to link this theme in Hebrew Scripture to the Christian Scripture, reminding us that the goodness and innocence of Jesus led to his suffering as well. (15) This is innocence, which should be admired in individuals, serves as a rather silly political stance for groups, lest they find destruction at the hands of other nations. (16) This further demonstrates the distinction between the morals of individuals, such as the ones who make it into the ACLU’s agenda, and the morals of groups, like states and nations. Falwell does not affirm such a difference, blaming individuals for the problems of a nation. Falwell sees that God protected America at one time because of the nation’s righteousness (though when we were perfectly righteous, I would like to know); God subsequently lifted this curtain because of the homosexuals and feminists in the country, leaving us open for terrorist attacks. Niebuhr sees that no such protective curtain has ever existed for any nation, neither for Israel nor America.

In responding to the terrorist attacks of last year, our nation is entirely too vulnerable to being consumed by its own pride, mostly because of thinkers, like Falwell, who endorse American biases. We must recover Niebuhr’s sense of the complex, structural sources of American problems. No other nation or governmental body matches us in power, military or economic, meaning that our power is often unmatched by other power. Our actions in the world arena flow from a faulty sense of utopianism. America purports to increase the amount of freedom in the world by spreading democracy and laissez-faire capitalism when it does anything but. Were we simply presenting other peoples with the ideals of personal freedom, governmental and economic, we would be blameless. Unfortunately, we export our fallen forms of democracy and capitalism, warts and all, to people whom we call “underdeveloped.” This latter-day imperialism serves America’s ends, not the ideal of freedom.

America’s governmental system could be classified not as a democracy, but as a republic at best, an oligarchy at worst. Increasingly, wealthy people hold the preponderance of power not only in the economic sphere but in the political realm as well. The token involvement that the rich offer to the rest of the nation, in the form of voting, does little to equalize the vast imbalance between the top and the rest of the nation. America’s government is not, nor has it ever been, a democracy; our capitalism is not, nor has it ever been, pure laissez-faire; these systems are weighted in favor of the powerful. Therefore trying to universalize these systems does not universalize freedom but extends the privilege of the wealthy, whom these fallen systems serve. The dominance of the wealthy in our system does not flow merely from raw economic power but from the ideological endorsement that our systems provide. So long as we allow politics and economics to support the notion that “What is mine is mine, I earned it fairly, and the other guy is free to do the same,” the rich are going to retain their privilege in stark contrast to the voiceless masses.

The War on Terrorism, then, attempts to make the world safe for these unjust ideologies. Many of the responses to terrorism have only served to furth entrench these ideologies in the minds of most Americans, giving us a blank check to reshape the world in our own image. The temptation to substitute our
own ideas for God’s ideals hardly needs to be stressed. So long as America’s most prominent public figures, political and religious, continue to construe these attacks in terms other than governmental and economic, our own pride will continue to flourish. We will feel safe behind a curtain of protection that does not exist, looking forward with false optimism to a day when our American utopia will spread around the world. What America needs is a dose of realism. Reinhold Niebuhr devoted his career as a public theologian to that task, though it seems to have been for naught. We continue to address problems that flow out of our systems rather than improving the systems themselves. The real War on Terrorism is the one that Niebuhr fought, the war against simplistic and erroneous explanations of complex problems.


2. *The Irony of American History*, p. 63

3. Niebuhr wrote at a time before the cultural shift toward inclusive language. Therefore, in an attempt to capture the flavor of his thought, my paraphrasings of Niebuhr preserve his sexist language. Where I express more current views, I use inclusive language.


10. The following biographical material comes from Richard Fox’s 1985 biography of Reinhold Niebuhr.


12. Ibid 127.


14. “Moral Meaning and Moral Obscurities” 128. Niebuhr often draws on literary terms in his writings, describing human existence as a drama, talking about our tragic nature, and pointing out the irony in our national heritage.

15. Ibid 131.

16. Ibid 133.