

This American mess: Where is Reinhold Niebuhr when we need him?

by [Andrew Finstuen](#) in the [December 1, 2009](#) issue

As the first decade of the 21st century comes to a close, the U.S. finds itself in a mess of historic proportions. Our economic crisis was preceded by a near-universal collapse in judgment about the use of U.S. military force abroad. This mess is profoundly embarrassing because it is of our own making and therefore one that could have been avoided.

Confronting and analyzing such embarrassments was theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's specialty. More specifically, he excelled in exploring the doctrine of original sin and its social and political ramifications. Niebuhr observed that the concept of original sin is universally rejected by "all schools of modern culture" and is "offensive to the modern mind." That rejection, Niebuhr thought, was itself a symptom of original sin.

Niebuhr argued that Americans overestimated the virtues of democracy and free market capitalism. On the rare occasions when Americans repented of their misdeeds, they did so by focusing on sins rather than the condition of sin inherent in them. Niebuhr spent a career warning of the dangers of this attitude and its destructive consequences. The disastrous wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the economic crisis are, from a Niebuhrian perspective, the terrible yet predictable outcomes of a nation unwilling to regard itself as sinner.

After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the U.S. was led to war by two guiding assumptions: that it was involved in a conflict between good and evil and that the democratization of the Middle East was a natural goal of U.S. foreign policy. Both of these assumptions violate Niebuhr's insistence on original sin and illustrate, as he wrote in 1959, the national delusion that comes from "the image of our innocence." As a result of this self-image and the belief in the "purity of our motives," it was difficult for Americans to believe "that anyone should dislike us." Thus the attacks of 9/11 were for most Americans mystifying.

Niebuhr worried about the effects of just such an event. Without a knowledge that the rest of the world has good reason to dislike us and without a sense that no human beings, not even Americans, are “masters of our fate,” he feared that Americans might undertake a “preventive war” in a “final desperate attempt to bring history under our control.”

After America engaged in this type of war in Iraq, new mystifications arose for this nation of innocents. The war went badly, along with attempts at democratization. But the war surged on, as did the rhetoric about the high ideal of establishing a just, democratic society there. For Niebuhr, such ambitious designs and such lofty rhetoric show a misunderstanding of “what a proud, vexatious and cruel king Demos may become on occasion.”

Democracy, according to Nie buhr, is founded on a recognition of human sin. As he famously stated: “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

The episodes in which America’s own sons and daughters committed heinous acts of violence—most notably in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and in the practice of “enhanced” interrogations—befuddled Americans’ sense of virtue. To immediately reestablish that sense, the White House and many Americans treated events like Abu Ghraib as the result of rogue operators—individual sinners who in no way reflected the moral character of the U.S. armed forces or the war effort.

Niebuhr identified and criticized the same assumptions about the virtues of American liberal capitalism. He objected to what he called the “social façade” of capitalism, which promised that “the laws of the market place” regulate economic affairs in such a way as “to insure that self-seeking was inherently harmless.” Such a notion was a “half-truth,” he continued, “because self-interest was interpreted as economic interest only,” whereas in reality self-interest is far more expansive. The full truth is that “men want power and glory as much, if not more, than they want material possessions.” Cast in this Niebuhrian light, the phrase “purchasing power” takes on a more than literal meaning and gives a more comprehensive explanation for the financially overextended banks, Wall Street executives and everyday Americans.

Only in the wake of depression and inflation, moreover, have Americans overcome what Niebuhr called the “dangerous miscalculations” and “illusions” regarding the

half-truth about the “reciprocity of the market.” Niebuhr was grateful that at those moments of crisis pragmatism prevailed—albeit “only after the need has become dangerously acute, with great human hardship and global repercussions.” Concluded Nie buhr: “We have been saved in a number of crises not by our doctrine, but by our inconsistency.”

At few times in American history has such inconsistency been more apparent than during the recent bailouts initially orchestrated by the Republican and purportedly Reaganomic administration of George W. Bush. Yet the economic crisis, like the scandals of the Iraq war, is still being diagnosed largely in terms of the sins of a few fat cats and their Wall Street cronies rather than as a consequence of systemic sin. To be sure, some individuals were worse offenders than others; but as Niebuhr puts it, they were supported by “a creed which understood the relation of power to interest and justice so little.”

Niebuhr’s answer to the international and domestic crises is not tough-minded political realism, as most commentators have suggested, but rather the Christian law of love. Of course, for Niebuhr, pursuing the law of love depends upon a profound awareness of the excessive self-love that is a consequence of original sin and that reigns in all individuals, groups, nations and their ideologies. The law of love must be accompanied by an understanding of the power of self-love in matters of political, economic and social relations. Otherwise, the quest for justice falls into idealism—an ignorance of the full weight of self-love—or into cynicism—an ignorance of the creativity and “residual capacity for justice” in humankind.

Niebuhr’s Christian approach to human relations abroad and at home does not point to this or that solution to inequality and injustice but rather to a willingness to “bring a full testimony of a gospel of judgment and grace to bear upon all of human life” so that “individuals recognize that judgment and mercy of God are relevant to their collective as well as to their individual actions.”

In the end, perhaps Niebuhr himself turns out to be more idealist than realist on the matter of original sin. For is it realistic to expect Americans, Christian or not, to confront the depth of their sin?