

# Reinhold Niebuhr and the Nuclear Dilemma: Conceptualising the Cold War

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## Abstract

This article re-examines the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr through the framework of his views on the nuclear dilemma. Recent historiography has questioned the theoretical consistency of Niebuhr's approach to this issue. However, the article demonstrates that his approach is based on a common misunderstanding of the 'realist' thrust of Niebuhr's thought, particularly his conception of the national interest and the potential for limiting conflict between states. In exploring his political philosophy more deeply, we can also clarify his more general Cold War stance and distinguish it from those of some of his contemporaries in important ways.

**Keywords:** Reinhold Niebuhr; Cold War; Nuclear Dilemma; National Interest; Realism; Cold War Consensus.

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## 1 Introduction

It could be said that Reinhold Niebuhr made his name as a public intellectual on the issue of conflict. Rising to prominence during the heated debates on American intervention in World War II, Niebuhr formulated a political theology that allowed Americans to recognise the tragic nature of warfare whilst refusing to disavow its responsible use in the face of greater evil.<sup>1</sup> After the war, many liberals looked to Niebuhr for their lead in responding to the challenges of the developing confrontation with the USSR.<sup>2</sup> However, the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Cold War posed problems for Niebuhr's view of the tragic inevitability of conflict between states. Indeed, Campbell Craig amongst others has argued that the nuclear dilemma caused a complete breakdown in Niebuhr's Christian Realism as he was compelled to adopt an idealistic anti-nuclear stance by the late fifties.<sup>3</sup> However, on closer examination, I contend that Niebuhr had a more complex understanding of the self-interested nature of states than many commentators have allowed, and consequently was able to adapt his understanding of conflict to the advent of nuclear weapons. Understanding this development in Niebuhr's thought is valuable because it may also serve to clarify distinctions within the broader 'Cold War consensus' of which he was a part. There is a tendency in the literature to treat those who supported a general stance of containment toward the Soviet Union as an undifferentiated mass, who could envision an end to the Cold War only on American terms, and who thereby perpetuated the conflict.<sup>4</sup> However, despite his anticommunism, Niebuhr's approach to the nuclear dilemma reveals a broader conception of the possibilities for cooperation between states that allowed him to frame the conflict as a common problem facing humanity and thus to transcend a purely nationalist viewpoint on the Cold War, in contrast to his more conservative Cold Warrior counterparts.

## 2 The Problem of Realism in a Nuclear Age

The foundations of Niebuhr's Christian Realism were laid during the turbulent inter-war years in the midst of the Great Depression and the breakdown of the Versailles settlement. Although this was a period of intense political change for Niebuhr, it was above all one of theological development. His reflections on the social and political crises of these years caused him to question what he increasingly saw as the Social Gospel's naïve belief in the ultimate perfectibility of society and the essential goodness of the individual. Conflict seemed to be a much more intractable problem than such views allowed. With the influence of other Christian thinkers such as his brother Richard Niebuhr and the theologian Paul Tillich, Niebuhr parted with his more liberal Christian background and moved towards the doctrine of original sin.<sup>5</sup> Sin, and thus conflict, was an ineradicable part of human nature that influences every action humans take, and its ultimate removal would now only take place at the end of history.<sup>6</sup> But this was not an embrace of pure pessimism. Niebuhr believed that naivety about human nature was not just harmful because it was excessively optimistic, but also because it frequently led to disillusionment and despair, or increasingly desperate attempts to bring the kingdom of heaven now. Political thinkers needed to be realistic about the problems they faced, without becoming cynical about the continuing disappointments of human history. Paradoxically, Niebuhr's affirmation

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1. Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2013), 314.

2. Russel Sizemore, "The Prudent Cold Warrior," *Ethics & International Affairs*, 1(1988), 200.

3. Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a new Leviathan: total war in the realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 91.

4. For Example, Jason Stevens *God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 29–63; Matthew Berke, "The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr," *First Things*, 27(1992): 37–42; Robert Horwitz, "The Revival of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Foreign Policy Fable," *Public Culture*, 1(2016): 113–138.

5. Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51; Scott Erwin, *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's 'The Irony of American History': 'In the Battle and Above it'*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2013), 26.

6. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 365.

of original sin involved an increased appreciation of God's work in the world.<sup>7</sup> Sin was a constant reality, but history was not without redemptive forces, even if they would only be victorious at its end.<sup>8</sup> This transcendent hope was what allowed the sustained appreciation of and engagement with the ambiguities of politics that was so needed in an age of fanatic ideology.<sup>9</sup>

This understanding was the source of all his mature reflections on the goals and aims of politics. Rather than achieving incremental progress toward a more perfect state through increasingly enlightened policies, Niebuhr came to believe that politics in this sphere was more about the *limitation* of sin than its progressive removal. Furthermore, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), Niebuhr argued that the effects of sin on human life were compounded in social settings so that it was almost impossible for groups to transcend their own self-interest.<sup>10</sup> Although all individuals are affected by sin, Niebuhr believed that there are still occasions where they can overcome their own self-interest and act altruistically. In groups however, "there is less reason to guide and check impulse, less capacity for self-transcendence, less ability to comprehend the needs of others and therefore more restrained egoism than the individuals, who compose the group, reveal in their personal relationships."<sup>11</sup> For this reason, therefore, groups "cannot be expected to make a clear sacrifice of self-interest for the wider good."<sup>12</sup> This was the starting point for any realistic approach to politics. Anyone who tried to avoid this fact was an idealist, and would be either attempting the impossible or deceiving themselves about the self-interest that underlay their actions.<sup>13</sup> In international terms, this meant that cooperation amongst states would be limited by their conception of their national interest.<sup>14</sup> Given that competing interests between states would not always be easily reconciled, conflict would be a problem endemic to the international system.

Niebuhr worked out the prescriptive implications of these observations in the debate over American intervention in World War II.<sup>15</sup> To begin with, if the United States were under genuine threat of attack, 'idealistic' solutions such as pacifism were invalid because they tried to apply a selfless moral code to a selfish nation. When push came to shove, the nation would not sacrifice its survival for a moral ideal.<sup>16</sup> However, although selfishness was universal amongst nations, it was still possible to make relative moral distinctions between them. Niebuhr had heard first-hand the horrors of the Third Reich from his close friend and student at Union Seminary Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>17</sup> America had many problems, but it had not yet sunk to the 'monstrous tyranny' of Nazism. There was therefore still a responsibility to make such moral distinctions, however relative, and to defend the good as far as possible.<sup>18</sup> This would not keep a moral perfectionist happy, because it would sometimes mean being involved or aligned with imperfect and selfish states. But this was the nature of political morality. To claim freedom from these restrictions was not only ignorant, but also risked obscuring the true nature of the responsibilities that lay before political actors.<sup>19</sup> The grace of God allowed Christians to be com-

7. Erwin, *The Theological Vision of Reinhold Niebuhr's 'The Irony of American History'*, 25.

8. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," in *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, ed. Robert MacAfee Brown, (Yale: Yale University Press, 1986), 113.

9. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 457.

10. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton (New York: Library of America 2015), 135–350.

11. *Ibid*, 139.

12. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The National Interest and International Responsibility," 1955, (Library of Congress: Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Box 16), 9.

13. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 451.

14. Niebuhr, "The National Interest and International Responsibility," 4.

15. Michael Thompson, "An Exception to Exceptionalism: A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr's Vision of 'Prophetic' Christianity and the Problem of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy," *American Quarterly*, 3(2007): 835.

16. Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," 102.

17. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 306.

18. Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is Not Pacifist," 115.

19. *Ibid*, 107.

mitted to such causes even as they recognized their ultimate imperfection.<sup>20</sup> In the case of World War II therefore, Americans needed to let go of their perfectionist moral tendencies, accept that conflict was inevitable, and make the best of it by defending their democratic inheritance. This understanding of the ‘moral ambiguity’ of World War II was thus an important addition to the intervention debate, as it allowed for American involvement in the war whilst avoiding the messianism that made liberals so uncomfortable.<sup>21</sup> The United States, Niebuhr insisted, was not acting as the savior of the world in fighting the Nazis. Rather, it was making a necessary choice between a greater and a lesser evil. There was nothing to be proud of in such a situation.<sup>22</sup>

With his ‘prophetic’ powers seemingly confirmed by the result of the war, Niebuhr swiftly became one of the leading figures of post-war foreign policy debates.<sup>23</sup> It might be assumed that Niebuhr’s Christian Realism was straightforwardly translated onto the new situation of the Cold War after World War II – merely swapping one totalitarian adversary for another – but there were a number of novel factors that needed to be negotiated in this new conflict, not least the nuclear dilemma.

Although he consciously avoided the language of American exceptionalism and messianism in the Cold War, Niebuhr nonetheless saw the Soviet Union as an unusually aggressive power and a threat to American interests.<sup>24</sup> He therefore supported containment policy and the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent.<sup>25</sup> However, the pursuit of containment raised important questions. How did Niebuhr define American interests in a world that was thought to be increasingly and irreversibly connected? And what criteria did Niebuhr have for determining the acceptable limit of conflict in the name such interests? This was not the total war of World War II, and America was not necessarily under the immediate threat of attack. But with the addition of nuclear weapons almost any kind of conflict could swiftly become a life-or-death struggle. Furthermore, as the USSR gained strategic parity, any large-scale conflict would likely ensure the annihilation of both powers. But a simple national-interest approach to this problem created a contradiction. Both superpowers were pursuing their security interests by creating more weapons, but more weapons increased the likelihood that any conflict would end in their mutual destruction.<sup>26</sup> Surely states had to be able to transcend self-interest at least somehow to grasp the common danger posed by nuclear conflict?

Indeed, this seems to be a problem which Niebuhr himself increasingly came to recognise. In the early years of the Cold War he largely supported the policy of nuclear deterrence, refusing in principle to draw an absolute distinction between the use of nuclear weapons and conventional weapons.<sup>27</sup> Nuclear weapons partook in the ‘moral ambiguity’ of all warfare insofar as they involved destruction of life, but no state could completely disavow their use if their survival depended on it.<sup>28</sup> However, as the confrontation with the USSR developed and took on global proportions, Niebuhr began to wonder whether “even a nation can reach the point where it can purchase its life too dearly.”<sup>29</sup> This led him to initially advocate for a ‘no-first-use’ policy for the hydrogen bomb, arguing for its development purely from a logic of deterrence.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as the decade advanced the nuclear dilemma continued to become one of Niebuhr’s deepest concerns. Part of this was sparked by his review of Henry Kissinger’s

20. Ibid, 118.

21. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 314.

22. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 362.

23. William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 34.

24. Sizemore, “The Prudent Cold Warrior,” 200.

25. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Our Chances for Peace,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 2(1947): 1; Berke, “The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr,” 39.

26. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 85.

27. Ibid, 80.

28. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Irony of American History,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr* ed. Elisabeth Sifton, 577.

29. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Hydrogen Bomb,” in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D.B. Robertson, (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1957), 237.

30. Ibid, 237.

1957 book *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*.<sup>31</sup> In Niebuhr's first review he was very receptive toward Kissinger's idea of a more flexible strategy for containment involving smaller limited wars and the selective use of tactical nuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup> However, in a second piece on the topic titled "The Moral Insecurity of our Security," he described his horror at being informed that the true destructive power of even these 'tactical' nuclear weapons was equal to those dropped on Japan in 1945. Niebuhr was horrified that "our physical survival seemed now to involve our moral annihilation. For even without the hydrogen bomb, a dozen Nagasaki bombs in Europe and Asia would mean the destruction of any moral claim for our civilisation."<sup>33</sup> If, as Niebuhr wrote, "there is obviously no security in the armaments which our realists so insistently commend, nor in the disarmament proposals which intrigue the idealists," what alternative could a Christian Realist propose?<sup>34</sup>

For Campbell Craig at least, the answer is not very much. As he writes:

Niebuhr recognised that the advent of thermonuclear weaponry had invalidated the main aspects of his philosophical understanding of international politics. His pessimistic belief in the continuing anarchy of the international realm could no longer be morally justified, as it seemed to portend an inevitable nuclear holocaust in a world in which technology cannot be uninvented.<sup>35</sup>

Craig's is the most drastic interpretation of Niebuhr's treatment of this issue, but he is not alone in questioning Niebuhr's philosophical consistency regarding the nuclear dilemma. Robert Williams likewise argues that

Niebuhr did not explicitly acknowledge the fact, but it is clear from a careful look at his writings that Christian realism alone, with its emphasis on the persistence of sin and the limits of human progress, provides no more hope for escaping the nuclear dilemma than do some of the various strains of idealism.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, we have a narrative that essentially questions the resources of Niebuhr's 'realistic' political philosophy to actually resolve conflict rather than simply account for it. This seems to be a common theme in several accounts of Niebuhr's thought and his Cold War stance more generally.<sup>37</sup> The general concern is that Niebuhr's dismissal of moral idealism threatened to undermine any resources political actors might draw upon to mitigate the pursuit of self-interest which posed such a particular problem in the nuclear age. As another recent commentator put it: "The grave problem with Niebuhr's public theology, as it evolved in the Cold War, is that it stressed the finitude of human thought and its sinful illusions to such a degree that it drastically minimized the creative, ecstatic, incisive powers of reason that could work in tandem with grace."<sup>38</sup>

However, there are a number of issues with this interpretation of Niebuhr's political theology and consequently of his views on the nuclear dilemma. These interpretations essentially fail to see past the initial step in Niebuhr's thought of affirming the persistence of self-interest to the next step of how he proposes to deal with that reality. In other words, these commentators focus on the descriptive aspect of Niebuhr's thought, from which they make their own conclusions, and ignore the prescriptions that Niebuhr himself suggests. In doing so, they are perhaps guilty of being too pessimistic about Niebuhr's

31. Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, (New York: Harper Brothers, 1957).

32. Robert Williams, "Christian Realism and 'the Bomb': Reinhold Niebuhr on the Dilemmas of a Nuclear Age," *Journal of Church and State*, 2(1986): 302.

33. Reinhold Niebuhr "The Moral Insecurity of our Security," *Christianity and Crisis*, 23(1958): 177.

34. *Ibid.*, 178.

35. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 91–92.

36. Williams, "Christian Realism and the 'Bomb,'" 304.

37. For example Robert Horwitz "The Revival of Reinhold Niebuhr: A Foreign Policy Fable," *Public Culture*, 1(2016): 113–138; Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: the Intellectual as a Social Type*, (New York: Knopf, 1965), 302–305; Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free*, 29–63.

38. Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free*, 53.

pessimism. Rather, Niebuhr still entertained hopes for how justice might be pursued despite the problems of self-interest among states. This was in two key ways. The first is to introduce an element of positive creativity in politics by coordinating self-interest with the general interest as far as possible. The second is to contest the definition of true self-interest, to the extent that more ‘moral’ policies can be based in or united with a pragmatic consideration of self-interest.

### 3 Morality and the National Interest

So, what exactly is Niebuhr’s conception of a ‘realist’ approach to politics and the role of the ‘national interest’? Niebuhr describes realism as being “the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation which offer resistance to established norms into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power.”<sup>39</sup> Any realistic approach must begin with the fact that states are unable to transcend their own self-interest. However, Niebuhr’s insistence that we recognise this reality is not so that we simply accommodate ourselves to it, but rather so that we can recognise the vital role we have to play in limiting its effects. States cannot simply be dissuaded from their self-interest, so, as he writes in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, the first task of good politics is in “finding the greatest possible concurrence between self-interest and the general welfare.”<sup>40</sup> Niebuhr was critical of those who thought that it was easy to reconcile competing interests between groups, as if mere moral suasion could override the habits of centuries.<sup>41</sup> But he did not think that it was impossible to do so. Political actors would need to be creative in finding ways to strengthen those areas of overlap between different interests in order to minimise conflict.<sup>42</sup>

A vital part of this task would therefore also be the process of defining those interests precisely. If “the business of statecraft is always to find the point of concurrence between the national interest and the common good,” then Niebuhr also recognised that “a certain degree of wisdom would of course be required to define the national interest adequately.”<sup>43</sup> This suggests that interests are not simply ‘givens’ which are handed to a state from the outside, but that these interests are contestable and to a certain extent constructed.<sup>44</sup> This stage is crucial because it essentially determines the limits of what a ‘national-interest’ foreign policy can look like.

The specific interests of each nation are of course subject to variation, but Niebuhr does suggest certain principles for assessing those interests accurately. Once again, these are rooted in a theological understanding of how humans were created to live. The first principle is that “nations, as individuals, are related in indeterminate degree to other life; and fulfil their life in these relationships.”<sup>45</sup> This means that it is possible for “both individuals and groups to relate concern for the other with interest and concern for the self,” for which there are “endless varieties of creativity.”<sup>46</sup> But it also means that it is actually necessary to do so, because “neither the individual nor the community can realise itself except in relation to, and in encounter with, other individuals and groups.”<sup>47</sup> Any nation that tries to estimate its interests without reference to how they are bound up with those of others does not in fact estimate them correctly. As Niebuhr writes again: “a consistent self-interest on the part of a nation will work against its interests because it will fail to do justice to the broader and longer interests, which are involved with the interests of other nations.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, Niebuhr argues that coordinating

39. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, (London: Faber&Faber, 1954), 114.

40. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 457.

41. Ibid, 360.

42. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires: A Study of the Recurring Patterns and Problems of the Political Order in Relation to the Unique Problems of the Nuclear Age*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 30.

43. Niebuhr, “The National Interest and International Responsibility,” 2.

44. Sizemore, “The Prudent Cold Warrior,” 216.

45. Niebuhr, “The National Interest and International Responsibility,” 1.

46. Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, 30.

47. Ibid, 31.

48. Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 129.

national-interest with the general interest is not merely morally preferable, but it is also of the highest pragmatic value.<sup>49</sup>

An important part of this redefinition of the national interest is also Niebuhr's understanding of power and the importance of 'prestige.' The self-interested nature of states means that they consequently seek to maximise their power in order to secure these interests.<sup>50</sup> However, given Niebuhr's understanding of the interdependence of interests, that power must not be understood as merely the power to coerce. Although military force is sometimes the "*ultima ratio* in a struggle with a foe," Niebuhr believed that it is in fact "ineffective when it lacks a moral and political base."<sup>51</sup> This is because of the basic fact that "in collective, as well as individual life, the force which coerces the body but does not persuade the will can have only negative influence."<sup>52</sup> Rather, it is prestige in the eyes of other nations that is in fact "the real source of authority in the political realm."<sup>53</sup> Prestige was what gave the exercise of power legitimacy, which in the long run would also amount to its efficacy.<sup>54</sup> In the past, states might rely on various sources of prestige such as their pretended divine sanction or so-called 'majesty,' but Niebuhr argued that in the present period the only source of prestige which really mattered "is the reputation of any authority for maintaining order and justice."<sup>55</sup> Short of a situation of total war, therefore, hard power would only be as effective as the prestige which underlay its use.<sup>56</sup> These conclusions were formed in response to a number of foreign policy debacles in South-East Asia and within the Western alliance, where Niebuhr saw that the United States was undermining its own authority in the West by its over-reliance upon military might.<sup>57</sup> Imprudent use of military power threatened to damage America's long-term interests if it led to a reputation for being a destabilising influence in the international community. The best way that the United States could secure its own interests, therefore, was by playing close attention to the interests and concerns of others.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, although deprived of a direct application of the 'law of love' to their sphere of action, a political actor may still perform two tasks that have moral value: the one is to find the greatest possible concurrence between the nation's interests and the general interest, and the other is "to persuade the nation that its own good is involved in the larger good."<sup>59</sup> A good example of this for Niebuhr was America's involvement in the reconstruction of Europe through the Marshall Plan, where "prudent self-interest was united with concern for others in a fashion which represents the most attainable virtue of nations."<sup>60</sup> In pursuing this kind of politics, Niebuhr hoped that a "tolerable harmony of competing and cooperating life impulses" might be achieved, where "the group recognises the possibilities of creative relation to other life, and guards against excessive assertions of interest by moral and communal restraints, and balances competing vitalities as much as possible so that no force or vitality will be able to express itself unduly."<sup>61</sup> This seems to be a much more hopeful picture of an ideal society than we might tend to attribute to a 'realist' thinker.<sup>62</sup> Sin would never be eliminated

49. Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 194; Josh Carlson, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Use of Force," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics God and Power*, ed. Richard Harries, Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 190.

50. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 367.

51. Reinhold Niebuhr "The Limits of Military Power," in *Love and Justice*, ed. D.B. Robertson, 192.

52. Ibid, 195.

53. Ibid, 193.

54. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Sources of American Prestige," in *Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton, 667.

55. Ibid, 668.

56. Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 197.

57. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 494.

58. Sizemore, "The Prudent Cold Warrior," 202.

59. Niebuhr, "The National Interest and International Responsibility," 2.

60. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Hybris," *Christianity and Society*, 2(1951): 4.

61. Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, 31.

62. Jannika Bostrom "Morality and the National Interest: towards a 'Moral Realist' Research Agenda," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 4(2016): 1635.

in these circumstances, but it could be limited by the creative powers of human community. This is indicative of Niebuhr's deeper understanding of the ambiguous nature of humanity. Humans live in the tension of being both created in God's image and corrupted by the fall. As such, they inhabit a liminal space, the 'now-and-not-yet,' where the spiritual kingdoms of heaven and hell are mingled, waiting to be separated at the final judgment. For Niebuhr, the imperfect quality of political solutions is a reflection of this truth.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, although international politics does take place within the restrictions of self-interested states, Niebuhr posits a creative role for political actors in tempering that reality and gives them strong incentives to do so. Despite the fact that conflict will never be completely removed, the degree of change that can be achieved within this system is still significant for Niebuhr. In *The Structure of Nations and Empires* (1959) Niebuhr uses the example of the religious wars of the seventeenth century to illustrate the possibilities for adjusting self-interest toward the general interest. Niebuhr highlights the fact that the pluralistic societies of the West were the result of a recognition that constant warring over religious issues was unsustainable. These nations did not agree to adopt pluralistic open societies all at once, but rather took the initial step of endorsing *cuius regio, eius religio*: that is, a policy of non-interference in the religion of each other's lands, thereby beginning "those adjustments of a competitive coexistence which gradually transformed the culture of Europe into a religiously pluralistic one."<sup>64</sup> For Niebuhr this represents the fact that nations will generally be unable to give up a perceived vital interest if it is directly challenged, but that through more indirect means their self-interest can be 'adjusted' and redefined gradually toward the general good.<sup>65</sup>

However, it is worth asking why Niebuhr limits us to this level of achievement. What harm does it do to be more morally ambitious in our political programmes? In *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr explains why moral idealism in politics is not just harmlessly ineffective but actively dangerous:

It must be understood that the children of light are foolish not merely because they underestimate the power of self-interest among the children of darkness. They underestimate this power among themselves. The democratic world came so close to disaster not merely because it never believed that Nazism possessed the demonic fury which it avowed. Civilization refused to recognize the power of class interest in its own communities. It also spoke glibly of an international conscience; but the children of darkness meanwhile skillfully set nation against nation. They were thereby enabled to despoil one nation after another, without every civilized nation coming to the defence of each. Moral cynicism had a provisional advantage over moral sentimentality. Its advantage lay not merely in its own lack of moral scruple but also in its shrewd assessment of the power of self-interest, individual and national, among the children of light, despite their moral protestations.<sup>66</sup>

Here Niebuhr makes it clear that approaches that are not realistic risk failing to limit conflict in more ways than one. Thus, his realism is not an attempt to check moral ambition, but rather a concern that we are working with the material that is actually given to us. It is not the case that he simply seeks to justify moral complacency. As he writes again,

The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community.<sup>67</sup>

63. Niebuhr, "Why the Christian Church is not Pacifist," 113.

64. Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, 269.

65. *Ibid.*, 269.

66. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 362.

67. Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, 181.

This raises some questions for Craig's understanding of the same work:

The *Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) addressed the problem of political evil with a resigned and despairing tone. Sin was likely to prevail in the end, and the best children of light could do was to resist it with their most effective means, namely, power, coercion, and the will to match the enemy's ruthlessness.<sup>68</sup>

#### 4 The Nuclear Dilemma

So how do these conclusions inform our understanding of Niebuhr's thought on nuclear weapons and the precise nature of the change that took place from his initial support of deterrence to his later anti-nuclear concerns? As we have seen, Niebuhr initially saw nuclear weapons as participating in the 'moral ambiguity' of all warfare, and they were justified to the extent that no state could refuse to use a weapon that might ensure its survival.<sup>69</sup> But this meant that Niebuhr's insistence on the limits of military power also extended to nuclear weapons. It may be a necessary backstop, but the real source of authority in international politics was still prestige. Any threatened or actual use of nuclear weapons outside of dire necessity actually risked seriously undermining American interests.<sup>70</sup> This was one of the main criticisms he had with the use of the atomic bomb against Japan. Niebuhr understood the temptation to use nuclear weapons to bring a swifter end to the war, but he questioned the actual benefit of such an action. Surely the bomb could have been used in such a way as to impress the Japanese of American capabilities but without such a loss of life? "The moral advantage of such imagination would have been tremendous," he concluded.<sup>71</sup> Thus, far from simply invoking the logic of 'tragic necessity' and the 'lesser evil,' Niebuhr was calling upon statesmen to be more creative in their approach to these problems, both for the sake of the general good and also for America's interests in the long-run.<sup>72</sup> This was even more important in the new situation of the Cold War because of the ideological nature of the conflict. If Niebuhr had any hopes of an acceptable American victory in the Cold War, it would not be in military terms. As he writes,

Communism is a movement of religio-political dimensions which cannot be defeated by military force. It can only be defeated if the non-communist world can counter the moral appeal of this revolutionary movement with moral, political and economic programs which will overcome the desperation and social confusion, in Asia and other parts of the world, in which Communist convictions are generated.<sup>73</sup>

The United States did need a 'preponderance of power' to be able to contain the Soviet Union, but this power consisted primarily of "the unity and the moral and economic health of our world," not the size of its nuclear arsenal.<sup>74</sup>

In this way, the centrality of prestige governed Niebuhr's approach in the earlier phase of his thinking on nuclear weapons. However, what we see in his later phase is not so much a disavowal of this earlier approach, but rather an expanded vision for how the nuclear dilemma could actually create areas of common interest between the U.S.S.R and the United States. This is because, as Niebuhr came to appreciate the true danger of nuclear warfare, he also saw that it was a problem shared by both superpowers. Consequently, it also had the potential to provide the basis for a more stable coexistence between them if they were able to see their common interest in preventing nuclear conflict.

68. Campbell Craig, "The New Meaning of Modern War in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr: Technological Influence on the Evolution of Christian Realist Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 4(1992): 689.

69. Niebuhr, "The Hydrogen Bomb," 236.

70. Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, 67.

71. Niebuhr, "The Atomic Bomb," in *Love and Justice* ed. D.B. Robertson, 233.

72. Carlson, "Reinhold Niebuhr and the Use of Force," 190.

73. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Two Dimensions of the Struggle," *Christianity and Crisis*, 9(1951): 65.

74. Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Protest against a Dilemma's Two Horns," *World Politics*, 3(1950): 344.

*The Structure of Nations and Empires: A Study of the Recurring Patterns and Problems of the Political Order in Relation to the Unique Problems of the Nuclear Age*, as its full title suggests, was Niebuhr's attempt to spell out exactly how the nuclear dilemma fit into his wider understanding of international politics. Here we can find the best expression of how he himself understood the implications of nuclear weapons for his Christian Realism. After revisiting the current situation of the Cold War in the second half of the book, Niebuhr then concludes that,

unless we annihilate each other in a nuclear war we must come to terms with the possibilities of co-existence with this regime. This task is easier than the abolition of nuclear weapons but it is not as interesting and does not excite the same devotion among the idealists. It is easier because it does not demand that the impulse for survival of each collective system be challenged directly. It is only required that each side allow historical developments to modify the animosities and to change the power realities within each system.<sup>75</sup>

This recalls Niebuhr's example of the religious wars of the seventeenth century and the gradual adjustments of self-interest that led to the pluralistic societies that exist now in the West.<sup>76</sup> The main point is that nations cannot easily sacrifice a perceived vital interest, but they can adapt their interests in time to overcome hostilities. In the same way, Niebuhr saw in the Cold War that "the first precondition of survival in such competitive coexistence is that both sides come to a full recognition of their involvement in a common fate."<sup>77</sup> In this way he hoped that the peril of war "may be avoided in the future as in the present, by the fear of mutual annihilation and the processes of diplomacy."<sup>78</sup> In accordance with his conception of the national interest therefore, Niebuhr argued that the United States and the U.S.S.R could best fulfil their self-interest by recognising how they had a common interest in the avoidance of nuclear war. For Niebuhr the nuclear dilemma thus became "a mutual 'bridge' between the Soviet Union and the U.S. during the Cold War."<sup>79</sup> Importantly, however, as Jannika Bostrom notes, "the collective interest was not served by a direct cause-and-effect relationship between each actor's primary intentions. Rather it can be viewed as corollary, resulting from each nation's rational desire to survive."<sup>80</sup> This new approach did not therefore constitute a departure from the basic principles of Niebuhr's Christian Realism, but was rather incorporated into his prior understanding of the possibilities for coordinating and redefining interests to limit conflict between states. Significantly, this bridge did not mean that he felt compelled to abandon his support for containing Soviet influence in other areas of the international sphere.<sup>81</sup> Niebuhr still believed that Communism was a harmful creed which created tyrannical governments that were hostile to liberal democracy. But to maintain the tension of these two positions was the essential burden of the Christian Realist; they must always seek to find common interests, whilst not shying away from the inevitable conflict that arises from the demands of relative justice.<sup>82</sup>

## 5 Niebuhr and the Cold War Consensus

These conclusions help us to clarify the place of Niebuhr in the broader political and intellectual climate of the early Cold War. As a leading public intellectual, Niebuhr's vocal anti-communism had an

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75. Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, 291.

76. *Ibid*, 269.

77. *Ibid*, 281.

78. *Ibid*, 286.

79. Bostrom, "Morality and the National Interest," 1632.

80. *Ibid*, 1633.

81. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Nuclear Dilemma," *Chicago Review*, 3(1963): 10.

82. Reinhold Niebuhr, "One World or None," *Christianity and Crisis*, 2(1948): 9–10.

influential role in rallying liberals behind the ‘Cold War consensus,’ which broadly supported American leadership in the West and containment of the Soviet Union.<sup>83</sup> In this, he was echoed by a number of prominent leftist thinkers who shared his trajectory from a more radical and critical stance in the early thirties to more social democratic views after the war. For example, many of those associated with the ‘New York Intellectuals’ such as Sidney Hook or Diana Trilling had their early political education through Marxism in the thirties, but would go on to play an important part in liberal anticommunism in the fifties, contributing through their writings in *Partisan Review* or by their involvement in groups such as the American Committee for Cultural Freedom (alongside Niebuhr).<sup>84</sup> These developments were by no means inevitable, as there were others on the left such as presidential hopeful Henry Wallace who were more interested in reviving the Popular Front and taking a conciliatory stance toward the Soviet Union.<sup>85</sup> Thus, the movement of many of the most prominent leftist intellectuals toward anticommunism in this period was important in ensuring the eclipse of Wallace’s position and cementing opposition to the Soviet Union as the shibboleth of American foreign policy. Indeed, Niebuhr explicitly attacked Wallace in the pages of *Life* magazine in October 1946 for his views, which he deemed dangerously idealist and naïve as to Soviet intentions.<sup>86</sup> The impact of his public intervention was undoubtedly all the greater for the fact that his prestige had risen to such heights after the war.

Because of the role of these intellectuals in the Cold War consensus, this period is consequently seen by many as essentially the capitulation of the American left to the conservative and nationalist discourse of the Cold Warriors.<sup>87</sup> Once these intellectuals had embraced the ideas of containment and the necessity of American preponderance, they forfeited their ability to take a critical stance on the Cold War and the abuses of power that went with it. This apparent resignation of political responsibility by the left is subsequently often linked to the rise of the New Right later in the century.<sup>88</sup> This narrative is strengthened by the fact that many of the New York Intellectuals went on to play a leading role in the neoconservative movement as they moved dramatically further right in the seventies and eighties.<sup>89</sup> Similar assessments have been made of Niebuhr specifically. For instance, Jason Stevens has argued that, although Niebuhr never openly embraced conservatism, his rhetoric masked the fact that his Cold War stance was not essentially dissimilar to conservatives such as Billy Graham. As he writes: “Though there was disagreement and outright antagonism between Niebuhr and Graham—the former committed to liberal pluralism at home and, ostensibly, containment abroad, the latter to anti-New Deal rollback and nationalistic expansion—each was nevertheless broadly supportive of the Cold War consensus regarding the roles of American power and national interest.”<sup>90</sup> Once again, later developments are suggestive of such a link, as aspects of Niebuhr’s thought have been appropriated by neoconservative thinkers such as Michael Novak.<sup>91</sup>

However, given our discussion of Niebuhr’s understanding of power and the nuclear dilemma, this assessment seems hard to maintain. Take his approach to containment policy for instance. Support for containment might be considered the touchstone of the Cold War consensus. Its fundamental premise that the growth of international Communism was directly harmful to American interests seemed to

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83. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 77.

84. Alan Wald *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 10.

85. Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, 39.

86. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 76.

87. Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889–1963: the Intellectual as a Social Type*, (New York: Knopf, 1965), 302–305; Martin Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue: Reinhold Niebuhr and American Intellectual Culture*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 204.

88. Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free*, 44; Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 204.

89. Wald, *The New York Intellectuals*, 7.

90. Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free*, 42.

91. Berke, “The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr,” 40.

enjoy bipartisan support for nearly two decades.<sup>92</sup> But, as J.L. Gaddis has highlighted, containment was a particularly nebulous idea which ranged from George Kennan's original focus on the industrial centres of Japan and Western Europe, to those who advocated full-scale counter-insurgencies wherever communist governments appeared in the world.<sup>93</sup> Thus, when we describe figures such as Niebuhr as "one of the key intellectual defenders of America's 'containment' policy" in the Cold War, we also have to ask 'which containment?' and subsequently, 'what kind of Cold War?'.<sup>94</sup> Niebuhr's focus on the political and economic aspects of the confrontation with the U.S.S.R. prompted him to disavow those strategies that would undermine the prestige of American capitalist democracy. On this basis Niebuhr was highly critical of military responses to Communism such as the American involvement in Southeast Asia, which he consistently attacked from as early as 1955 until his death in 1971.<sup>95</sup> This could be contrasted with Cold Warriors such as John Foster Dulles, whose policy of Massive Retaliation represented an explicit endorsement of the idea that every interest was an American interest so far as it involved the Soviets.<sup>96</sup> Niebuhr rejected this logic because it not only committed American resources to marginal issues, but it also undermined America's position vis-à-vis the non-aligned nations, whose neutrality was increasingly under attack by Dulles.<sup>97</sup> Importantly, Niebuhr does not seem to have been alone amongst liberals in this critical stance towards containment. Writers such as Seymour Lipset, Irving Howe, and Sidney Hertzberg all shared similar concerns about the abuse of American power in the 'Third World' and the self-defeating nature of many of its policies.<sup>98</sup> These were not fringe opinions, but rather, as Andrew Preston writes, such views "epitomised the liberal approach to the Cold War."<sup>99</sup> If it is granted that the Cold War consensus fell apart under the tension of the Vietnam War, then it seems that the seeds of its dissolution were present almost from the start.<sup>100</sup>

Furthermore, it is important to recognise not simply that such differences existed, but that they in fact embodied radically different understandings of the Cold War as a conflict. The nuclear dilemma is perhaps the most revealing example of this. Niebuhr's approach to this issue shows that he did not see the Cold War as a zero-sum-game of interests where a victory for the Soviet Union meant an inevitable loss for the United States or vice-versa.<sup>101</sup> Rather, even despite their ideological opposition, Niebuhr still saw some areas where the interests of the superpowers might overlap. Indeed, by conceiving of the nuclear dilemma as a common problem facing humanity, Niebuhr overcame the logic of a strict Cold War stance which saw the only acceptable peace as entirely on American terms, and thus he arguably transcended a purely nationalist viewpoint on the conflict.<sup>102</sup> This puts pressure on the view that anticommunism in the early Cold War necessarily involved surrendering to a single hegemonic understanding of the conflict or one that was solely dictated by conservative concerns. Rather, different 'Cold Warriors' could have vastly different visions for the Cold War, even as they seemed to pursue ostensibly similar goals.

Such distinctions are necessary to make because other examples show that how actors understood the nature of the Cold War ultimately shaped its character in important ways. For instance, the perception of a common interest in the prevention of nuclear war was vital to the cooperation between

92. Ronald Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 192.

93. J.L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War*, Rev. and expanded ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 24–124.

94. Berke, "The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr," 37.

95. Halliwell, *The Constant Dialogue*, 211.

96. Niebuhr, "The Limits of Military Power," 192; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Vietnam: Study in Ironies," in *Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Elisabeth Sifton, 689–696.

97. Niebuhr, *The Structure of Nations and Empires*, 295; Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 490.

98. Richard Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s*, (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 359.

99. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 490.

100. For a historiographical overview of the Cold War Consensus see Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, 191–218.

101. Preston, *Sword of the Spirit*, 490.

102. Sizemore, "The Prudent Cold Warrior," 216.

Reagan and Gorbachev that contributed to the end of the conflict.<sup>103</sup> As long as each side saw the war as a zero-sum game such a breakthrough would not have been possible. The parallels with Niebuhr's vision for the end of the Cold War are revealing, but the point is not to prove that he somehow predicted or contributed to such an event. Rather, it is simply to illustrate that different conceptions of the nature of the conflict could have a profound impact on how it played out. Clearly Niebuhr's and other liberal understandings of the Cold War were not as influential as might have been hoped in their lifetimes, but this prompts us to ask why certain visions of the conflict prevailed over others in the American imagination when they did. Recognising the contested nature of even those periods of relative 'consensus' is clearly a necessary step to tackling such questions.

In this way, therefore, it is illuminating to focus in on Niebuhr's political thought and understand more precisely how it informed his Cold War stance. As we have seen, the nuclear dilemma in particular raised difficult questions for Niebuhr in regard to his 'realistic' view of international politics. However, on closer inspection, it seems that this issue did not precipitate the crisis in Niebuhr's Christian Realism that some have seen. Rather, by emphasising the interdependence of interests and the importance of 'prestige' to power, Niebuhr created strong reasons to avoid an expedient *Realpolitik* and highlighted the possibilities for international cooperation even despite his rejection of idealism; original sin did not make the basis for a unremittingly pessimistic view of politics.

Although not all liberals shared his underlying political philosophy, Niebuhr's example is nonetheless helpful to clarify the kinds of concerns that characterised the liberal stance in the early Cold War more generally. This stance was broadly based upon a tentative endorsement of the value of liberal democracy which was seen as under threat by the Soviet Union and the spread of global Communism. However, that this fact constituted *carte blanche* for the United States to aggressively pursue her national interest never seems to have been a consideration that was remotely entertained. Rather, Niebuhr was deeply concerned with the prudent use of American power and provided constant reminders that the United States was only as 'innocent' as its actions proved it to be. Neither did he allow the Cold War to become a totalising conflict in the manner of some conservatives, but rather recognised common interests with the Soviet Union in some areas even as he saw necessary conflict in others. Acknowledging these aspects of Niebuhr's thought thus asks questions of our understanding of the Cold War consensus more generally. This 'consensus' in fact seemed to house a broad variety of different conceptions of the Cold War, each of which competed to shape the course of the conflict according to their separate visions.

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103. Matthew Evangelista, "Transnational Organisations and the End of the Cold War," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Vol III Endings*, ed. Melvyn Leffler, Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 418; James Wilson, *The Triumph of Improvisation: Gorbachev's Adaptability, Reagan's Engagement, and the End of the Cold War*, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 115.

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