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# Balancing Democracy with Power: Responsibility, Order, and Justice in Reinhold Niebuhr's World View, 1940–1949

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## Abstract

From the moment Reinhold Niebuhr heard of the events at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, he immediately began imagining American involvement in the peace that would follow Allied victory over the Axis powers. Arguably the most prominent Protestant theologian in the twentieth century, Niebuhr developed an intriguing view of the international system in the 1940s. Niebuhr believed it was America's responsibility to champion a world order or community that would defend and promote justice in the face of tyranny. For justice to exist, order was necessary and democracy was the best way to promote world order, but not the only way. He also realized that "power" in the international system also affected global order. To him, the world could not solve global problems through an ideal system of international law, nor did he think that the possibility of world organization was purely a question of the manipulation of power. By understanding that a balance between a democratic world order and one based upon preponderant power was necessary, Niebuhr identified with both realist and idealist. The 1940s was the testing ground that would continue to shape and affect his views of the international system. How did Reinhold Niebuhr believe the world could make the transition from war to peace in the 1940s? This pivotal decade for the United States in the twentieth century was indeed central to Niebuhr's evolving world view that a global order, balancing the use of or willingness to use power (whether political, economic, or military) with a democratic based system, would bring about a just peace.



“The world community, toward which all historical forces seem to be driving us, is mankind’s final possibility and impossibility.”<sup>1</sup>

“We can save man from another holocaust only if our nerves are steady and if our moral purpose is matched by strategic shrewdness.”<sup>2</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr

From the moment Reinhold Niebuhr heard of the events at Pearl Harbor, he immediately began imagining American involvement in the peace that would follow Allied victory over the Axis powers. Arguably the most prominent Protestant theologian in the twentieth century, Niebuhr developed an intriguing view of the international system in the 1940s. Niebuhr based his view of international relations upon the idea that American responsibility in the world was to champion a world order or community that would defend and promote justice in the face of tyranny. For justice to exist, order was necessary. For Niebuhr, democracy was the best way to promote world order, but not the only way. He also realized that “power” in the international system also affected global order. Therefore, the United States needed to find a balance between a democratic world order and order based upon preponderant power. He identified with both realists and idealists, finding a central position between the two schools of thought. To him, the world could not solve global problems through an ideal system of international law, nor did he think that the possibility of world organization was purely a question of the manipulation of power. The 1940s was the testing ground that would continue to shape and affect his views of the international system.

The relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States, both emerging world powers, became Niebuhr’s focus during the 1940s. As the war continued into the decade, Niebuhr realized that the Americans and Russians would emerge from the Second World War as the most powerful nations, and that any future world order would need the involvement of both to succeed. Yet as the war ended, the relationship between the two powers appeared to be an obstacle to the peace. Niebuhr believed that the two had to come to some understanding over the basis of world order. A democratically based world order was unlikely with a Stalinist Russia. Although a dictatorship, the Americans and their allies had things they could learn from the Soviets, which were necessary for a successful world order – among their willingness to use power to obtain their goals. In order to have peace, Niebuhr said that the democratic powers had to combine the development and use of power with democratic means in order to create a world order that would bring about peace and justice.

What follows is an account of Reinhold Niebuhr’s thoughts on human nature and their application to the realm of international relations during the 1940s. Many works exist dealing with Niebuhr’s life. Among them are Ronald Stone’s *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* and Paul Merkley’s *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account*. Both authors deal mostly with Niebuhr’s political interests and career, and the connection between his political view and theology. However, each tends to stress his role in the Cold War to the exclusion of World War II. Other scholars such as Landon Gilkey, Robin W. Lovin, and Gordon Harland, among many others, focus on Niebuhr’s theology without effectively fitting his thought into a broader historical context. Three books in particular, are more successful in combining Niebuhr’s political and religious life. The first is an edited work by Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall, *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*. Kegley and Bretall’s collection is indispensable, as is Richard Wightman Fox’s *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* and Henry B. Clark’s *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. All three works give substantial insight into the connections between Niebuhr’s theology and pol-

itics. What is missing in these works is a focused study of Reinhold Niebuhr's thoughts on world order or world community in the 1940s. How did Reinhold Niebuhr believe the world could make the transition from war to peace in the 1940s? This pivotal decade for the United States in the twentieth century was indeed central to Niebuhr's evolving world view that a global order, balancing power (whether political, economic, or military) with a democratic based system, would bring about a just peace.<sup>3</sup>

To truly understand Niebuhr's positions, a brief background is necessary. His early childhood, adolescence, and adulthood developed his thoughts into the 1940s. Among the most influential aspects in his life were his religious background, intellectual development at Yale Divinity School and Union Theological Seminary, and his political activity in the 1930s and 1940s.

Born in 1892, Reinhold Niebuhr was the son of Gustav Niebuhr, a German immigrant and pastor of the German Evangelical Church in Webster, Missouri. Reinhold was not the eldest child, but he was certainly the favorite son. Gustav often invited Reinhold to share in his intellectual life and follow in his footsteps. In imitating his father, he enrolled in Eden Theological seminary to become a pastor in the German Evangelical Church. Along with this weighty expectation, his father began to see Reinhold as the future head of the household – the one to look after his mother and sister should his father pass away. Gustav was both liberal and evangelical in his faith, adhering to the Social Gospel. He was unconcerned with doctrinal precision, and believed that not everything in the Bible was literally true. Reinhold strove to imitate his father in these respects.<sup>4</sup>

Although Reinhold wished to become more like his father, the younger Niebuhr struggled with his own identity as a German-American. He spoke both German and English, but strove to make himself more American – so he decided to go to Yale Divinity School, hoping to become a pastor like his father, but also looking for an experience that would help him assimilate into American culture.

Because his father had put much expectation upon Reinhold to succeed, Niebuhr emerged into manhood with a strict sense of duty, honor, responsibility, and commitment to hard work. The qualities

Gustav instilled in Reinhold manifested themselves while Reinhold attended Yale Divinity School from 1913–1915. At Yale he began to both emulate his father intellectually as well as attempting to become more American rather than German American. It was at Yale that Reinhold decided to master the English language and make it his primary language of communication for the rest of his life. During his time at Yale he also began his first attempts at writing for national periodicals. In 1913, Gustav passed away and Reinhold came to see his own life as a completion of his father's. As he continued his education, he immersed himself in the prevailing currents of American intellectual thought, as well as continuing to adhere to his father's liberal and progressive ideas.<sup>5</sup>

Upon leaving Yale, Niebuhr accepted a pastorate at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit in 1915. Because his messages challenged his parishioners to actively think about their faith, Niebuhr gained almost immediate notoriety in American religious circles, and began to accumulate abundant experience dealing with political leaders, business leaders, labor union officials, and ecclesiastical policymakers. He also began to travel throughout the US on lecture tours in connection with European seminars organized and funded by the wealthy Protestant leader, Sherwood Eddy. During these lecture circuits he met many influential political and religious leaders, and gained the patronage of Eddy who would be influential in getting him a position at Union Theological Seminary in 1928. The period from 1915 to 1928 in Detroit is marked by an outpouring of articles in both religious and secular journals. Also during these years, Reinhold involved himself in many different organizations and political movements – including the Socialist Party – which gave him leadership experience and honed his organizational skills. While in Detroit, Niebuhr thus broadened his thinking and met many influential figures.

Although Niebuhr identified himself with many of President Woodrow Wilson's ideals during World War I, a trip to the occupied Ruhr in 1923 changed his outlook. He became skeptical of wars fought for liberal ideals, because of the France's harsh, revenge-like policies in the Ruhr. His trip through the area caused him to reject war and embrace pacifism. Yet Niebuhr never saw

himself as a “good” pacifist. He always stressed his reservations about pacifism, even while declaring the illegality of war. He criticized those who were naïve in stressing the use of reasonableness and goodwill as strategies in working for peaceful settlement and repudiated these as means for establishing world order. He believed that pacifism and pacifists were ignorant of the structures of international power and the way these worked on a global scale. Although he was no longer as committed to the idealists’ means and goals, he still believed humankind should strive for them even though they were unrealistic.<sup>6</sup>

Until the 1930s, Niebuhr continued to hold on to a slipping adherence to Social Gospel idealism and socialism, but never completely abandoned either. While at the Union Theological Seminary in the late 1920s and 1930s as a Professor in Applied Christianity, his thoughts on human nature and world view flourished. As with his views on pacifism, his adherence to Social Gospel idealism and socialism also began to change. As he had chastised the pacifists, Niebuhr argued that the goals of these liberal movements were utopian, naïve, and overly idealistic. Just as he was never a “good” pacifist, he was never a “good” Social Gospel idealist or socialist. After witnessing labor disputes while living in Detroit, Niebuhr increasingly saw that humans would not always act selflessly or morally. People would act selfishly and the kingdom of God or utopia could not be created in this world, yet at the same time he knew that there was goodness in the human race, and believed that humans, although immoral at times, should strive to act morally in the face of immorality. Humans should strive to make the world better even though it may not lead to anything better. “Moral man” fought for justice in the world, used as little violence as possible, and conscientiously humbled himself along the way. A moral man also should not shrink from responsibility. The responsible man should struggle for justice although nothing may come of it. A moral man had to work within the morally ambiguous power structures of society, developing and using countervailing power when necessary to bring about justice. This marked Niebuhr’s turn away from idealism, towards a more idealistic realism – often termed “Christian realism” – the use of force

and even violence if necessary in the battle for justice, striving to be democratic whenever possible, but non-democratic whenever necessary.<sup>7</sup> Niebuhr’s ideas on humankind transferred easily to his views of international relations during the 1940s.

How did this all fit into Niebuhr’s thoughts during the 1930s and 1940s? The mid 1930s to the 1940s marked an increased preoccupation with international relations for Reinhold Niebuhr. As he developed his brand of idealistic realism that stemmed from events in both Europe and Asia in the 1930s, Niebuhr began to apply his view of humankind towards the international system. Not only did Niebuhr focus on theological issues which he applied to the realm of international politics in books such as *Christianity and Power Politics*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, but he established two journals that dealt with Christianity and international affairs, *Christianity and Crisis* (1939) and *Christianity and Society* (1940). As an editor of both periodicals, Niebuhr’s ideas and arguments reached numerous subscribers, among them fellow Christians, government officials, and the interested public. This prolific writing during the 1940s is a window into the development of Niebuhr’s thought on the transition from war to peace.

Niebuhr’s idealistic realism/Christian realism became a tool through which to critique and resist fascism and shore up struggling “bourgeois” democracies as stated in his work *Christianity and Power Politics* (1940). He wished to defend the relative justice of a bourgeois society against the “barbarians” in the international arena. When war began in Europe in 1939, Niebuhr called for all aid to the Allies short of war. He did not yet believe that the US should use violence or that it was American responsibility to be militarily involved in the war. Violence, he believed, should be used only when it was necessary, yet he did not believe it so at that point. But at the same time, he said that war against Germany might be necessary to help common civilization – meaning democratic Europe. He spoke out against staunch pacifists, saying that true Christian love was not the avoidance of war but responsibility towards others in need. Therefore, American responsibility was to help the beleaguered “democratic” nations of Europe against the Axis.<sup>8</sup>

Along with his own works, whether books or articles in his own journals or other national publications, Niebuhr also helped create the Union for Democratic Action (UDA) to gain support of the non-communist left for President Franklin Roosevelt's policies. Above all, Niebuhr hoped to fulfill American responsibility towards the British in particular. In 1941, the UDA lent support for Lend Lease and protection of Lend Lease shipping. Above all, the UDA promoted the idea that Americans owed something to common civilizations – in Niebuhr's thinking, a moral commitment to liberate Europe from oppression. He began to promote the idea that Americans must take responsibility for future world order.<sup>9</sup>

Niebuhr did not have to wait long for the United States to become directly involved in Europe, and by the end of 1941, Niebuhr preoccupied himself with imagining the peace. Those who had superior power would have great responsibility and alone could enact the peace. Idealists were wrong in believing that the moral course was to surrender excess power and to seek equal participation by all in a world government. Balance of power realists also erred in believing in tossing out the idea of a world government and that the world would be better ordered with a perpetual standoff between power blocs. Niebuhr suggested a middle ground between the idealists and realists – the Soviets, Americans, and British could share world leadership. Each of the three would limit each other as separate power blocs. Smaller nations would also be brought into the councils of the three. Thus realism would be tempered with a touch of Wilsonian idealism – big power responsibility would be balanced by small power rights. Separately idealism and realism would not work because “the idealists at their worst imagine that an ideal system of international law would solve the international problem.... The realists understand that the organization of the world is, as every political problem, a question of the manipulation of power.” Therefore he believed that “If we are to have a decent peace, we must learn to combine the insights of the realists and the idealists. The problem is more difficult than the idealists imagine. But it is not as insoluble as the realists claim.”<sup>10</sup> As the war progressed, Niebuhr began to worry about the US and USSR being involved in the peace. As the two most powerful nations, he

believed they had the responsibility to be involved in the world system, but was afraid that they were adolescent and “unpredictable giants.” Therefore the British as the mature and stable power would be the broker between the up and coming world powers.<sup>11</sup>

According to Niebuhr, two characteristics were necessary for a lasting peace. One was the creation of a durable world order, while the other was the development of justice (according to Niebuhr, the possibility of equality or mutual love amongst people, or in this instance, nations) within the new system. Order would come about through the organization and use of preponderant power by the great powers. Justice, on the other hand, would come about only if the great powers set up constitutional instruments to guarantee the weaker nations their just or equal rights. Niebuhr believed the prospect of achieving order was likely, but there was little prospect that justice would or could be achieved through constitutional arrangements because of the ideological differences between the West and the Soviets.<sup>12</sup>

However, the establishment of a workable world order was not as easy as Niebuhr had earlier described. As a wartime alliance, the United Nations was in early 1943, “little more than a concept and...not politically implemented.” In addition, Niebuhr continued, “a more stable world community is not possible if the lessons of the war are disregarded.” Those lessons were responsibility in the world and the necessity and possibility of common action among the great powers. To become a stable and powerful world community, the United Nations needed organization that kept in mind the lessons of war and could not be a mere balance of power or a federation of states, it needed to be somewhere in between. The United Nations would keep each of the four powers in check – it would prevent an Anglo-American, Russian, or Chinese domination of the world community, but at the time being there was nothing within the system that would bring justice to the weaker nations.<sup>13</sup>

Key to the development of a stable world order, according to Niebuhr, would be American use of power. First of all, Niebuhr was concerned with America's aversion towards political or military intervention on the international stage. The United States had to define its responsibilities within the international community. He



warned, “if the impulse of isolationism should overwhelm this nation the second time, we will become the chief instruments of world anarchy.” The United States needed to be steadfast in its international stance and embrace its responsibility as a great power.<sup>14</sup>

America needed not only to use its power but use it responsibly – concerning itself with order and justice. Order would come through the organization of preponderant power among the great powers (of which the US would be one), because there was no other way of overcoming the anarchy of nationalist impulses. He believed justice could be achieved within this system if one of the great powers had the conscience and imagination to establish a constitutional system, which would protect weaker nations’ rights. American-style democracy would be the best way to keep power in check and promote justice. Yet the problem arose over the nature of constitutional instruments, since American brand democracy would not be acceptable to all, particularly the Soviet Union. Because of this difference, there would be little chance of agreement over how the world would be ordered. Niebuhr was also concerned over both Russian territorial domination in Eastern Europe and American piety.<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr listed Russian policy as “the desire to establish Russian security and power” and American policy as “full of Christian and liberal universalism.”<sup>16</sup>

Because Soviet and American policies seemed incompatible, Niebuhr began to wonder whether an overall agreement on postwar policies between the wartime allies could happen. The question was, “what kind of comradeship [could] be established after the war [was] over?” To answer his own question, Niebuhr replied, “we share neither the fears of those who believe that there is no possibility of working out an accord between Russia and the western world, nor the hopes of those who think the difference between us and Russia is a very slight one and that historical forces will soon overcome it.” Realizing that throughout history nations of varying cultures learned to live together, Niebuhr said that the Americans and Soviets had to come to terms with each other. America would have to deal with nations that were not democratic in order to establish a workable world order.<sup>17</sup>

The postwar world would need order, yet there was little prospect of a fully developed world system of constitutional order be-

cause not all nations would be willing to participate in a democratic system that would limit their power. Great powers, even those that were democratic, showed little inclination to delegate their authority to a world government. To Niebuhr, it appeared that a successful world system would be unlikely with “the inclination of Russia to seek security by territorial arrangements in the area contiguous to it, and...the inclination of America to exploit its dominant power, as the strongest industrial nation of the world, in an effort to win security by itself.”<sup>18</sup> There seemed to be little chance of agreement between the great powers.

Although he knew there was still much to overcome, Niebuhr became more optimistic in the chances for an agreement on postwar policy between the United States and the Soviet Union after the October 1943 Moscow Conference. Looking back at the conference, Niebuhr related, “an agreement to discuss basic issues is however something of an achievement in itself, particularly considering the previous tensions between Russia and the western powers.” What became even more apparent after the conference was how the powers could organize the European continent so it would become neither an Anglo-American or Russian colony nor a mere tool in the combined politics of the great powers. To achieve a positive result, a European federation of some kind would be integral to the mutual accord among the great powers of Britain, America, and Russia. Any federation would have to draw the nations of continental Europe into the overall agreement with the great powers that the British, Americans, and Soviets would hold the effective authority in world politics. It was obvious to Niebuhr that this would be a way to fulfill his earlier vision of great power responsibility in maintaining world order balanced by small power rights. Therefore the future world order would combine the insights of the realists with those of the idealists. He knew the answer to the problem was to “have more ‘constitutional’ features than a mere partnership between the big powers. What is called for is a synthesis between Woodrow Wilson’s approach and the piece-meal approach to world problems in which Churchill and Roosevelt seem to be engaged.” Therefore power would be combined with democracy for a just world order.<sup>19</sup>

By 1944 Niebuhr was not quite a household name, but he was a growing presence in intellectual debate and a popular orator at college campuses across the nation especially after his book, *The Children of Light and Children of Darkness*, which built upon his earlier work *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and his articles from the early 1940s. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr looked at the paradoxical nature of man as sinner and as image of God which led him in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* to see democracy as a valuable political instrument. In his thinking, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." He continued to argue that bourgeois society had created democracy as a political tool, but had underestimated the power of self-interest which would lead to injustice. Thus, democracy would be a necessary *part* of any future world order so as to promote a just peace.<sup>20</sup>

Yet the future order would need more than just democracy to work. Niebuhr said there was much to learn from the fascists and Stalinists – "the children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but must remain free from their malice." The children of darkness – the fascists and Stalinists had been more realistic in their view of human existence than the children of light. The children of light needed to adopt the children of darkness' shrewdness, while retaining their own moral purpose and openness. He believed that the marketplace of ideas in an open society or democracy would discourage the self-interested. Democracy was built on men's virtues while protecting against their vices – in other words, democracy acted as "checks and balances" between the good and evil within society. Reinhold thus was concerned about the apparent injustice of the world at war. Niebuhr warns the "Children of Light" from believing that they possess superior virtue (Democracy) to those against which they are arrayed. He believed that human beings needed to be realistic – willing to develop and use power, much like the "children of darkness," in struggles to promote order and justice in the world system. Therefore he believed American responsibility could include further violence or use of its power to secure order and justice for the world system. Democracy alone could

not secure world order. Both Democracy and power would be necessary for a just world order.<sup>21</sup>

When the war ended in Europe in spring 1945, Niebuhr continued his outpouring of ideas on world order. After the San Francisco Conference (April-June 1945), Niebuhr was pleased with the improved character of the United Nations. The character of the UN improved since the small nations made themselves heard, gained considerable rights, and because general public discussion brought a greater degree of moral idealism into the charter. Yet under the surface of the UN charter, the political realities gave little assurance for Niebuhr. He believed that the conference "was unable to solve the main problem which confronted it, which was the establishment of a genuinely mutual accord between Russia and the west." The final outcome of the conference was that a system of world security existed on paper but did not hide the fact that each of the great powers controlled a part of the world under their "sphere of influence." Niebuhr believed, "none of the great powers are quite certain that one of the other powers may not poach in the preserves assigned to the other." Therefore after the conference, at issue was lack of trust between the Soviets and Americans. Without trust between the two major powers, the UN as a world government would be a failure.<sup>22</sup>

Such mistrust soon manifested itself in Niebuhr's thoughts. By 1946, Niebuhr's contacts in Germany insisted that the Soviets were engaged in a systematic effort to impose a Communist regime in Germany and in the nations of Eastern Europe, and came with a more dismal view of the Soviets. He began to fear Stalinism as much as Nazism. He wondered,

What shall we think of Russia? Is this totalitarianism just like Nazism? Is Russia bent upon expansion and aggression just like fascism? In answering such questions we must admit that Russian authoritarianism has similarities with any other form of authoritarianism. The lack of freedom in Russia makes it impossible for instance to establish any direct contact with the common people of Russia and to achieve a community of mutual trust between them and us, without



which all constitutional provisions for peace are vain. Furthermore the lack of democratic procedures will make the Russian domination of Eastern Europe so vexatious that all sorts of unrest must be expected. But this [unrest] will not lead to democracy; because the more unpopular the Russians make themselves, the less will they be able to allow criticism against their rule to be expressed.<sup>23</sup>

Because of Russian domination in Eastern Europe, democracy would be unlikely to flourish. For this reason, the United Nations could serve only as a bridge between the Western world and the Soviet Union and its satellites. In Niebuhr's eyes, the UN would not be a successful world government.

Niebuhr did believe that the USSR had rights to security interests and control in Eastern Europe, however the Russians would not be satisfied with a defensive system in Eastern Europe but wanted control of Europe. They would do so by scaring the West with threats of war and thus receive concessions. Niebuhr believed that the way to avoid war that could ensue from Russian threats, was not to fear it, but at the same time to be patient. "Under these circumstances, a policy of yielding would run the risk of resulting in the same consequences which flowed from Mr. Chamberlain's ill-fated diplomacy. But it must be emphasized that patience is as necessary as firmness. We must continue to bargain with the Russians."<sup>24</sup> A way that firmness and patience could be combined would be through massive economic aid to Europe.<sup>25</sup>

In following his thinking on massive economic aid to Europe, Niebuhr supported President Harry Truman's appeal to Congress for \$400 million in emergency military and economic aid to Greece and Turkey. He said that Soviet Communism threatened both "democracies." It was the United States' responsibility to aid these beleaguered democracies. He was a strong supporter since he kept in contact with many of his European associates which gave him a clearer (or possibly biased) view of the situation. He believed American moves were absolutely necessary, although these countries could not really be called democracies. These countries were not at stake, but the

peace in Europe was. According to Niebuhr, the move to aid these countries was of symbolic significance – Americans taking responsibility to bring order and justice to Europe. If it helped bolster the fight between more democratic sections within Western European nations against their own communist groups, then he was for it. He believed that the Russian threat was political rather than military — namely the creation of Soviet satellites in Western Europe. Niebuhr held similar ideas to Secretary of State George Marshall and supported the Marshall plan. He believed, "Europe is in dire economic straits and cannot possibly get on its feet unaided. We cannot avoid the spread of either economic chaos or of political totalitarianism or of both (the later being the fruit of the former) if we do not come to the aid of a European economy which is threatened by complete collapse." The way to proceed against the Russian political threat was to make sure that the European economy was not weakened enough for European citizens to turn towards communism.<sup>26</sup>

Niebuhr continued to believe that the constitutional world system of the newly chartered United Nations may not work as intended because of the atomic bomb and because of world plurality or the differences between the "democracies" and the Soviets. "The bomb" issue engulfed nations in the hysteria of fear that the world would "stumble into an atomic war and mutual destruction." Above all, the American monopoly on the destructive force aggravated the already great mistrust between the two powers. Mistrust also developed because not all had the same democracy as the US. Great powers would not be ready to submit to world authority – did not want to give up their power to an international body based upon democratic ideals. Above all the Soviets were not a democracy, but a dictatorship. He saw that, "no better solution than the division of Europe into spheres of influence seems to have been arrived at."<sup>27</sup> In other words, the continent was now "divided" between the west and the Soviet Union – the UN, as it stood – was a farce.

Niebuhr's beliefs were echoed by some British. "They would maintain the UN as a bridge with Russia, but they believe that if Russia refuses to cooperate in an international [system], the United Nations can serve only very minimal ends." However, there was minimal hope

that if the Western world remained firm and patient, it would be possible to change Russian attitudes. According to Niebuhr's "strategy of patience," one way to bring this about would be to "stop futile efforts to change what cannot be changed in Eastern Europe, regarded by Russia as its strategic security belt." The other related aspect of this strategy was to realize, "that, while further encroachments of Russia in Western Europe...might mean war, it is also apparent that the effort to keep Russian power in bounds must not be primarily military. The way to save Western Europe is to give it a sound economic basis for a sound political life." Therefore Niebuhr continued to espouse not only democratic means but the use of power in maintaining order in Europe.<sup>28</sup>

In the end, Niebuhr believed that the UN, "does not have the power to establish a stable world order. But it is an important center for the meeting of minds."<sup>29</sup> To Niebuhr, world order was not a hopeless venture because the UN had failed to establish a stable global system. He spoke out against those he labeled idealists, saying, "they have wearied us with their constant reiteration that we will have no civilization at all if we do not achieve a genuine world order." According to the idealists, the world would not avoid mutual annihilation unless a successful world government that could bring all nations under its domination and substitute the system of mutual fear with mutual security. To Niebuhr, the idealists slogan of "one world or none" was a "foolish slogan" because of "the present impossibility achieving world government." Likewise he said that the politicians who "are trying to preserve some minimal contact with Russia even while they resist Russian encroachments on the continent are not as logical as the idealists....But their wisdom, however lowly and pragmatic, is a better guide out of our chaos, than the wisdom of the idealist." His advice was that the United States should not give in to despair, but to responsibly remain both firm and patient in the quest for order and justice in a postwar world, in which there was no clear road to security or peace.<sup>30</sup>

In 1949, the North Atlantic Treaty appeared to be a radical departure in American foreign policy, yet Niebuhr proclaimed it the "logical capstone of a policy which has been developing ever since

we emerged from the second (*sic*) World War as the world's most powerful nation." Specifically it brought two elements to logical conclusion. The first one was that the United States now had a new sense of responsibility in the world community. It also spelled out the American nation's special responsibility to the North Atlantic community, western civilization, or the "democratic world." The North Atlantic pact was necessary because, "the present reality is that the United Nations presupposes the unanimity of the great powers, which does not in fact exist. This great organization has therefore been reduced to the status of a minimal bridge between East and West." Although such a function was important, it was not the original intention of the UN. To Niebuhr, the peace of the world depended upon the maintenance of preponderant power in the West. The pact was necessary because the Western European nations desired it. The Atlantic treaty was partly designed to quiet the fear of Soviet occupation of the continent and to prove to Europe that the United States would do what was necessary to increase their capacity to resist occupation, much as had been done with the Marshall Plan. Again, the United States had a responsibility, in this case to the "democratic world," to promote order and justice in the world. The North Atlantic Pact was the way that the United States could combine power and democratic means to carry out its responsibility.<sup>31</sup>

Yet Niebuhr continued to worry whether it was advisable to organize the west too tightly. At issue was the fragile nature of the minimal bridge between the West and the Soviet Union in the United Nations. Niebuhr stated, "our recent success with the Berlin airlift proves how important it is to remain in a bargaining position with the Russians. The prophets who predicted that our firmness in regard to Berlin would inevitably end in a shooting war, have been refuted by events. We can still bargain with Russia." Had the United States not remained firm or patient they would have lost their chance to negotiate with the Soviets.<sup>32</sup> Although Niebuhr did not create a world system, he explained why the United Nations failed as a workable system and why NATO worked as a stable order that could promote justice for its membership.

In conclusion, Reinhold Niebuhr developed an intriguing view of the international system in the 1940s. His views were that American responsibility was to uphold world order to defend and promote justice. In order to do this, the United States had to take advice from both realists and idealists to form a new outlook towards establishing a global system by balancing democracy with the use of power. The 1940s was the test for his emerging theory.

Although Niebuhr envisioned an interesting world view, he was not the architect of American grand strategy in the 1940s. As one of the most famous Protestant thinkers of the twentieth century America, Reinhold lived his life in the spotlight, unlike many scholars and preachers. Thousands discussed and were influenced by his nationwide lectures and prolific scholarship. Because of his notoriety, government policymakers, political figures, and other national leaders sought Niebuhr's guidance. From 1946 on, he had been a member of Council of Foreign Relations and met regularly with the State Department's Advisory Commission on Cultural Policy in Occupied Territories. He was also invited to join in deliberations of George Kennan's Policy Planning Staff in June 1949 for two days. Yet he did not have a notable impact upon American policy-making in the 1940s.

Although Niebuhr did not create world order, his contribution was that he explained why the United Nations failed as a workable system in the 1940s and why NATO worked as a stable community that promoted justice for its membership. He therefore made suggestions for future reference. By the end of the decade, Niebuhr saw the failures of the United Nations as a stable world order that would be able to bring about a just peace. According to Niebuhr, any successful world order would combine the insights of the realists with that of the idealists. This meant that the United Nations would need order based upon preponderant power shared among the great powers. This did not happen because of the failures of the Western great powers and the Soviet Union to share world power as ideological differences developed into mistrust between the former Allies. Although the United Nations was able to bring weaker powers into the councils of the great powers, the stronger nations could not guarantee just rights to the smaller nations. In

the end, the United Nations served as a minimal bridge between the East and the West. Although this was a good development, it was not the intended purpose for the UN.

For Niebuhr, American responsibility transferred to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The United States would be the great power that would guarantee the Western Europeans their just rights in the world system. American power would be combined with a democratic system to create a workable world order. The alliance with the Europeans was workable because of a moral consensus – these nations were “democratic” so it was much easier to come to an agreement for this reason. NATO would create peace by remaining firm and patient towards the Soviet Union. The United Nations would only be the way through which the Soviet Union and the West could negotiate with each other, while NATO would be the stable order that would help prevent another war.

## Notes

- 1 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and the Critique of its Traditional Defense*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, p. 189.
- 2 Reinhold Niebuhr, “For Peace, We Must Risk War,” in *Life*. (1948), vol. 25, no. 12, pp. 38–39.
- 3 See Ronald Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians*. Louisville: Abingdon Press, 1972; Paul Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975; Landon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr: A Theological Study*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001; Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995; Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960; Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretalls, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*. New York: Macmillan, 1956; Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985; Henry B. Clark, *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994.

- 4 Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. pp. 1–12
- 5 Henry B. Clark, *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994. p.10.
- 6 Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Trip Through the Ruhr," in *Evangelical Herald*, August 9, 1923.
- 7 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man in Immoral Society*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932. pp. 1–4, 25, 75, 267–272.
- 8 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940. pp. 42–47, 66–69, 168–172.
- 9 Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. pp.198–199.
- 10 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Plans for World Organization," in *Christianity and Society*. (1942), vol. 7, no.2, pp. 6–7.
- 11 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Plans for World Reorganization," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (Oct. 1942), vol. 2, pp. 3–6; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Power and Justice," in *Christianity and Society*. (1942) vol. 8, pp.9–10.
- 12 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Possibility of a Durable Peace," in *Christianity and Society*. (1943), vol.8, no. 3, pp. 9–12.
- 13 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The United Nations and World Organization," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (1943), vol. 2, no. 24, pp. 1–2.
- 14 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the Peace," in *Christianity and Society*. (1942) vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 8–9.
- 15 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Perils of Our Foreign Policy," in *Christianity and Society*. (1943), vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 18–21.
- 16 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Nationalism and the Possibilities of Internationalism," in *Christianity and Society*. (1943), vol. 8, no.4, pp.5–7.
- 17 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the Western World," in *Christianity and Society*. (1942), vol.7, no. 3, pp. 7–9.
- 18 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Perils of Our Foreign Policy," in *Christianity and Society*. (1943), vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 18–21.
- 19 Reinhold Niebuhr, "From Wilson to Roosevelt," in *Christianity and Society*. (1943), vol. 8, no.4, pp. 3–5.
- 20 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and the Critique of its Traditional Defense*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, pp. xiii–1.

- 21 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and the Critique of its Traditional Defense*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944, pp. 41, 118, 182–190.
- 22 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The San Francisco Conference," in *Christianity and Society*. (1945), vol. 10, no. 3, pp.3–4.
- 23 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Russian Enigma," in *Christianity and Society*. (1946), vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 4–7.
- 24 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Chances for Peace," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (1947), vol.7, no. 2, pp. 1–2.
- 25 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Will America Back Out?" in *The Nation*. (1945), vol. 160, no.2, pp. 42–43; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Russia and the West," in *Christianity and Society*. (1945), vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 5–6.
- 26 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Marshall Plan," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (1947), vol. 7, no. 17, p. 2.
- 27 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Myth of World Government," in *The Nation*. (1946), vol. 162, no. 11, pp. 312–314; Reinhold Niebuhr, "Will America Back Out?" in *The Nation*. (1945), vol. 160, no.2, pp. 42–43
- 28 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Europe, Russia, and America," in *The Nation*. (1946) vol. 163, no. 11, pp. 288–289.
- 29 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The United Nations," in *Christianity and Society*. (1946), vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 3–4.
- 30 Reinhold Niebuhr, "One World or None," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (1948), vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 9–10.
- 31 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The North Atlantic Pact," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (1949), vol. 9, no. 9, pp. 65–66.
- 32 Reinhold Niebuhr, "The North Atlantic Pact," in *Christianity and Crisis*. (1949), vol. 9, no. 9, pp. 65–66.