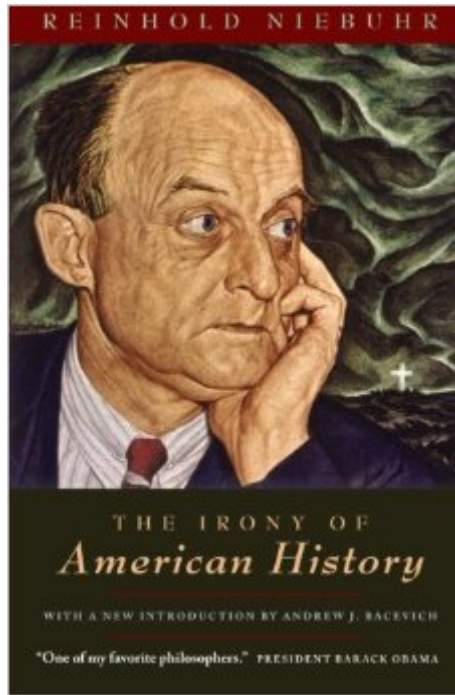


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# The Irony Of American History



## Synopsis

â œ[Niebuhr] is one of my favorite philosophers. I take away [from his works] the compelling idea that thereâ™s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldnâ™t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away . . . the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard.â •â "President Barack Obama" Forged during the tumultuous but triumphant postwar years when America came of age" as a world power, *The Irony of American History* is more relevant now than ever before. Cited by politicians as diverse as Hillary Clinton and John McCain, Niebuhrâ™s masterpiece on the incongruity between personal ideals and political reality is both an indictment of American moral complacency and a warning against the arrogance of virtue. Impassioned, eloquent, and deeply perceptive, Niebuhrâ™s wisdom will cause readers to rethink their assumptions about right and wrong, war and peace.â •â "The supreme American theologian of the twentieth century.â •â "Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *New York Times*â œNiebuhr is important for the left today precisely because he warned about Americaâ™s tendencyâ "including the leftâ™s tendencyâ "to do bad things in the name of idealism. His thought offers a much better understanding of where the Bush administration went wrong in Iraq.â •â "Kevin Mattson, *The Good Society*â •â "Irony provides the master key to understanding the myths and delusions that underpin American statecraft. . . . The most important book ever written on US foreign policy.â •â "Andrew J. Bacevich, from the Introduction

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## Customer Reviews

In *The Irony of American History*, Reinhold Niebuhr reviews the competing ideologies of communism and liberal democracy and finds that they both express an overly optimistic view of human nature. In the liberal view, the defects in human nature are curable through education or changes to social and political institutions. In communist ideology, the proletariat is a repository of virtue that will create a perfect society when the corrupting influence of the institution of private property is abolished. History, of course, shows that these views are dangerously inaccurate. Against them, Niebuhr offers the Christian view that man must struggle to create justice in this world while realizing that ultimate solutions lie beyond his grasp: "every sensitive individual has a relation to a structure of meaning which is never fulfilled in the vicissitudes of actual history." This book was written more than 50 years ago, during the hottest part of the cold war. Much of the book focuses on America's new (at that time) responsibilities as a superpower, and on the struggle between communism and democracy. Still, a modern reader will be surprised by the book's relevance to the current position of the United States in the world. Niebuhr takes it as self-evident that, if there is one center of power and authority, "preponderant and unchallenged, ... its world rule would almost certainly violate basic standards of justice." He outlines the attempts made in the U.S. constitution to diffuse power among different institutions and create a system of checks and balances. He cites James Bryce's assessment: "The aim of the constitution seems to be not so much to attain great common ends by securing a good government as to avert the evils which will flow not merely from a bad government but from any government strong enough to threaten the pre-existing communities and individual citizens." This works well enough in the United States, but how can the dangers associated with hegemonic power be averted in an international context? Niebuhr, a realist, notes that "no world government could possibly possess, for generations to come, the moral and political authority to redistribute power between nations in the degree in which highly cohesive national communities have accomplished this end in recent centuries." However, he expresses optimism that the United Nations might serve as a forum in which national policies are subjected to the scrutiny of world opinion. He also suggests that a sense of community with others might serve as some kind of internal check on power. Establishing such a sense of community requires recognition of our own fallibility and of the valid elements in what are to us foreign cultures, outlooks, and systems of government. Niebuhr sees that the strength of the United States after World War II has brought us into contact with very different societies, and "... neither their conceptions of the good, nor their interests, which are always compounded with ideals, are identical with our own." Lacking a deep understanding of the complexities of national aspirations and cultural differences, U.S. foreign policy

often lunges between two extremes of offering economic advantage to secure cooperation or overcoming intransigence through military force. Moreover, the United States has always considered itself an example for others to follow: "except in moments of aberration, we do not think of ourselves as the masters, but as tutors of mankind in its pilgrimage to perfection." People in the United States do not lust for world power, although we feel the pride that accompanies power. Because we see our motives as idealistic, the anger that others feel toward us is hard for us to understand or accept. The great danger for the United States is an excess of hubris. "Our moral perils are not those of conscious malice or the explicit lust for power. They are the perils which can be understood only if we realize the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon; and of power to become vexatious of the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently. The ironic elements in American history can be overcome, in short, only if American idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historical configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue."

"Simply put, [this] is the most important book ever written on American foreign policy." Thus writes Andrew Bacevich in his introduction to the newly reissued book written by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1952. Bacevich is a Niebuhr scholar and author of the just published book, "The Limits of Power". He was largely responsible for getting "Irony" reissued. The timing of this book becoming available, as well as of Bacevich's own book, couldn't be better. Niebuhr was a pastor, teacher, activist, moral theologian and prolific author. He was a towering presence in American intellectual life from the 1930's through the 1960's. He was, at various points in his career, a Christian Socialist, a pacifist, an advocate of U.S. intervention in World War II, a staunch anti-communist, an architect of Cold War liberalism, and a sharp critic of the Vietnam War. *The Irony of American History* traces the course of American idealism and exceptionalism from its very beginnings in the providential thinking of the Pilgrims who settled Massachusetts. Written early in the Cold War, Niebuhr devotes much of his analysis to comparing and contrasting Marxian communism and the "bourgeois" liberalism, or liberal democracy of America. While he clearly argues that the liberal project of democracy offers more to the "common good" of the community than does Marxism, both have the seeds of their destruction in the illusions they hold. So-called "Niebuhrian realism" is the ability to see through such illusions as a condition for avoiding the worst pitfalls they carry. Alas, one of the greatest of these pitfalls is the American tendency to suppose that we can manage history. As Niebuhr writes: "The illusions about the possibility of managing historical destiny from any particular standpoint in history, always involves, as already noted, miscalculations about both the power and the wisdom of

the managers and of the weakness and the manageability of the historical 'stuff' which is to be managed." He goes on to point out that "In the liberal versions of the dream of managing history, the problem of power is never fully elaborated. ...On the whole, [American government] is expected to gain its ends by moral attraction and limitation. Only occasionally does an hysterical statesman suggest that we must increase our power and use it in order to gain the ideal ends, of which providence has made us the trustees." Is it not painfully evident that we reached one of those "occasional moments" after 9/11 when "hysterical statesmen" - Bush and Cheney, et al - argued for a profound increase in the power to gain the "ideal ends" of bringing "freedom" to Iraq and the Middle East since we are the obvious "trustees" of this freedom? Herein lies the element of "irony", the philosophical and spiritual core of Niebuhr's arguments. The first element of irony, Niebuhr points out, "is the fact that our nation has, without particularly seeking it, acquired a greater degree of power than any other nation of history" and we "have created a 'global' political situation in which the responsible use of this power has become a condition of survival of the free world." He continues: "But the second element of irony lies in the fact that a strong America is less completely master of its own destiny than was a comparatively weak America, rocking in the cradle of its continental security and serene in its infant innocence. The same strength which has extended our power beyond a continent has also interwoven our destiny with the destiny of many peoples and brought us into a vast web of history in which other wills, running in oblique or contrasting directions to our own, inevitably hinder or contradict what we most fervently desire. We cannot simply have our way, not even when we believe our way to have the 'happiness of mankind' as its promise." In Iraq we have met the enemy and "it is us". Not enough of us understood that "we cannot simply have our way" in the exercise of American power, which is thought to be essentially military power, to head off the folly in which we are buried and the prospect of a war without end. Writing all this in 1952 with the cataclysmic dangers of the Cold War becoming a hot war, Niebuhr foresaw the increasing globalization of the world and the danger of not recognizing and accepting the limits of our power to bring freedom and happiness to the rest of the world, especially through military means. This slender book of 173 pages is loaded with these prescient observations warning us clearly of the catastrophic dangers that can follow from a failure to understand the limits of our power of our exceptionalism and of the illusion that we can manage all this history to accomplish our supposedly moral and "good" ends for other nations. When you finish reading this book you will then want to read Bacevich's book, "The Limits of Power", in which he essentially channels Niebuhr's understanding and traces the history of the last 60 years in which the Bush-Cheney foreign policy has become simply an extension of the direction American foreign policy has taken, primarily from

the Reagan administration onward.

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