TERROR HAS NO VISAGE: WALTER LIPPMANN,
REINHOLD NIEBUHR, AND THE ORIGINS OF EVIL

A thesis presented to
the faculty of
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Masters of Arts

Jonathan B. White
June 2002
This thesis argues that theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and journalist Walter Lippmann developed similar ideas about the origins of evil, and it is their realistic understanding of the causes of social injustice in American democratic society that might correct contemporary cultural and academic misperceptions about the nature of evil.

In today’s technologically advanced society, pragmatic theories in education, sociology, and philosophy put forth an idea of progress that promises to eradicate evil. The media produces fast moving and horrific images that desensitize us to its presence. Today, the idea of evil has become less terrible and less real; we are no longer able to imagine its horror as we once did, nor do we see the problem of evil as each person’s moral responsibility.

The conclusion is that contemporary modern society lacks an apparatus for detecting the evil around us. Both Lippmann and Niebuhr recognized this problem. They tried to find a perspective that balanced individual and social views on evil, one that saw evil originating within rather than outside the self. Thus, they made it a universal problem, one that we all must confront as a community in order to find salvation for humanity.

Kenneth Heineman, Professor of History
Acknowledgments

I am indebted to a number of wonderful people who helped bring this project to a conclusion. My parents, Bruce and Alice White, provided unlimited encouragement and support which they have given tirelessly throughout my life. Without them, I would not have had the opportunity to study history. Professor Charles Alexander introduced me to the field of intellectual history and to several similarities between Lippmann’s and Niebuhr’s writings. Professor Ken Heineman was extremely helpful in promptly returning drafts and providing insightful comments along the way. Professors Hamby and Mattson expanded my knowledge of American intellectual history and helped to give this project the depth it needed. A comment by Ray Haberski in seminar class inspired me to use the theme of evil as a focal point for Lippmann’s and Niebuhr’s writings on democracy. Finally, many thoughtful and encouraging discussions with Israel Lagos allowed me to think about the topic in ways I had not previously considered. To these people I am grateful.
Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.................................................................................4

Introduction..........................................................................................6

Chapter 1..............................................................................................16

Chapter 2..............................................................................................65

Conclusion............................................................................................121
Introduction

A recent cover of Newsweek Magazine featured a blood-red visage of Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh with the block letters "EVIL" superimposed over top. The story, which appeared twenty one days before McVeigh's execution on June 11, 2001, included the bi-line, "what are the roots of evil?", and outlined several sociological and psychological theories that tried to explain why seemingly normal human beings commit acts of indescribable terror.

For six years the Oklahoma City bombing has loomed as an unfathomable horror in the public consciousness. Immediately following the blast, media sources hypothesized that Middle East terrorists were behind the attack. Even after McVeigh's execution last month, an event which many victims' families claimed would bring them closure, the public struggles to find an explanation for the Oklahoma City tragedy.

Clearly, Americans have failed to grasp the nature of McVeigh's radical evil, not only because the bombing was an unprecedented act of domestic terrorism -- the worst in U.S. history -- or that it was an insidious violation of the country's moral sensibility. The true source of the conundrum is rooted in a moral deficiency in American culture: America presently cannot articulate the evil it encounters because it lacks the moral language to do so. As Newsweek writer Sharon Begley pointed out, most people prefer to characterize McVeigh "as evil incarnate, as Satan, as depravity in human form," a monster outside the scope of "normal." But in so doing, observed Begley, we deny the possibility that the same hatred that seized McVeigh might also afflict us. By attributing radical evil
exclusively to the actions of the psychopath, we place it in a "not us" category, thereby further limiting our conceptual mechanisms for understanding it.¹

What is the source of this evil and how can we recognize it? During the 1990's, the federal government's attempts to legislate against acts of terror brought us no closer to an understanding. New York Times columnist Andrew Sullivan recently argued that the abstract language of America's hate crime laws has obscured the meaning of crimes associated with sexism, racism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia. Sullivan's central point was that the many forms of hate that exist today originate not within the psychopathic mind, but within human nature. Hate is often manifested as a prejudice in the form of vengeance -- a natural human emotion that infects the victim and the victim's family as much as it does the perpetrator.²

If scientific approaches have failed to bring us closer to an understanding of the nature of evil, education has done no better. "It is one of the most foolish clichés of our time," wrote Sullivan, "that prejudice is always rooted in ignorance, and can usually be overcome by familiarity with the objects of our loathing." Sullivan pointed to the irreducible racial tensions that existed under segregation in the United States and in Rwanda. The dynamics of community conflict, he concluded, can just as easily lead to expressions of resentment and hatred as much as they produce efforts toward progressive action and social improvement.³

Sullivan's article touched on two key criticisms of our contemporary understanding of evil. The first illuminated a trend of modern twentieth century

---

³Ibid, 55.
American culture, observing that Americans have traditionally distanced themselves from terror and social injustice by making the perpetration of evil a relative problem, something that exists in the other rather than the self.

The second criticism challenged several key concepts of pragmatism, an early twentieth century philosophy born from the writings of American philosophers Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. While Peirce, James, and Dewey each developed their own versions of pragmatism, all three conceived a method of scientific inquiry that tested ideas to produce verifiable, value-free, socially useful knowledge. Some of today's philosophers who claim to follow in this tradition emphasize the pragmatic concepts of a community of inquiry and social action as the best means for addressing contemporary social problems. Certainly, this conception of pragmatism was instrumental in overcoming the formalistic laws that existed at the turn of the twentieth century, and today it continues to offer a source of hope for social renewal. However, as Sullivan suggested, pragmatism has proven too optimistic in its assessment of the viability of community action and the potential of human intelligence. Too often it conceives of evil as an eradicable entity rather than an irreducible social force based in the stubbornness of power.

Part of the difficulty in articulating the parameters of evil in contemporary culture may be that our disconnection from the potency of evil is so deeply rooted in American history. Author Andrew Delbanco demonstrated how Americans from the Puritan era to the modern era gradually lost their conception of evil as a cornerstone of a moral order. As America shifted from a God-fearing nation to the modern, secular state, luck or chance became the new divinity. Evil no longer
remained God's revelation and part of the human imagination, but was projected onto the luckless have-nots.

Modernism produced what Delbanco identified as the hubristic cultural tendency to scapegoat those who fell outside the circle of normal. Individuals and groups in history who demonized the subversive, such as the Red Scare raids against radical aliens in 1919 and Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy's so-called anticommunist "witch hunts" from 1951 to 1954, demonstrated the human capacity for evil; they played God by placing their own purposes above others. Delbanco feared that by turning away from the spiritual revelation of sin and toward the scientific extermination of social injustice, America has extinguished its imaginative capacity to sense the evil of our unrecognized limitations.

Delbanco sympathized with the Puritan spirit and those intellectuals in history who adopted a transcendental moral system -- one that could gauge our limited capacity to both conquer social injustice and perceive the fragility of our own egocentric and finite existence. He admitted that the Puritan conception of evil was likely lost for good. In its place, he hoped for a new construction created from universalist insight, one that recognized the symbolic importance of Satan. It was the presence of Satan, argued Delbanco, which instilled a sense of individual moral responsibility in each citizen and reminded us of our limitations as human beings.  

This thesis argues that the effort to give the universalist view of evil a modern twentieth century context can be traced to two American liberal intellectuals who rose to prominence at the outset of the Cold War. Beginning in

---

the early 1930's, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and journalist Walter Lippmann argued that America had lost its ability to detect evil. Each made parallel efforts to resurrect a greater moral awareness among the American public, to reconstruct a moral fabric that had once formed the basis for a public wisdom about the limits of human nature and the persistence of power. Both Lippmann and Niebuhr searched for practical methods to apply their neo-orthodox principles to American politics and society, and it was the pragmatic tone of their universalist inquiry that provides us today with the most realistic perspective on evil.

Niebuhr and Lippmann are often linked together as mid-century realist critics of dominate theories of world government and the "utopian" currents in Communism, pacifism, and isolationism at the outset of World War II. Scholars often accredit them as conservative critics of the theoretical basis liberalism during the inter-war period, which was pragmatism. Postmodernist scholars accuse realists such as Niebuhr and Lippmann for building a white-male centric view of history, thereby concealing the histories of ethnic and gender relations in their narrow conception of justice, liberty, and equality. Only a few authors, however, recognize that both Niebuhr and Lippmann had their roots in pragmatism and remained critical yet sympathetic observers of progressivism throughout their career. As essentialists with a deep compassion for social justice, theirs was a life long effort to find a pragmatic foundation for politics within a transcendental system.

Most pragmatists would undoubtedly reject this notion, arguing that pragmatism by definition cannot support any sort of transcendental system of values. To be sure, by the time Niebuhr and Lippmann reached the height of their popularity at the outset of the Cold War, each had left behind much of the
pragmatism of their early career. Niebuhr shifted from his radical experimentation with Marx to more absolute tenets of Christian realism and God's law. Lippmann, a strong adherent of progressivism before the war, became much more comfortable grounding his ideas of knowledge and public philosophy in "traditions of civility." By the end of World War II, Lippmann had turned away from secular humanism toward the more absolute standard of natural law.

This said, neither Niebuhr nor Lippmann gave up on their pragmatism. They recognized that democratic theory was legitimized by balancing idealism with empiricism. They agreed with James and Dewey that no set of universal values could be socially functional without a democratic arena of debate by which to test their worth. But unlike Dewey, they saw that liberalism needed a stronger foundational theory of universal values that could transcend the capriciousness of public opinion -- what they considered the bane of democracy. Where Dewey saw experimentation and public opinion as the defining feature of democratic liberalism, Niebuhr and Lippmann evoked a transcendent philosophy that allowed for a certain amount of experimentation and flexibility in forming laws and government.

That the America intellectual community turned to neo-orthodoxy during one of the most crucial moments in American history speaks for the utility of its view of evil. Sixty years ago, just after the outbreak of World War II, American liberal intellectuals found a use for Niebuhr's and Lippmann's metaphysics, evoking the absolute standard of democracy as a bulwark against fascist tyranny. The dominant trend in liberalism emerging at that time which eclipsed progressivism, or pragmatic liberalism, valued a sense of universal sin in human nature, an awareness
of the tragic nature of history, and a faith in a transcendental standard by which one could judge relative claims of right and wrong.

Today in academia, the sublimation of race and class identity in America's cultural past is now the central preoccupation of liberalism. Those liberal historians and philosophers who wish to revive philosopher John Dewey's ideas on pragmatism and democracy, commonly identify themselves as "anti-foundationalists" or "anti-essentialists." For these neopragmatists, the metaphysical language of sin is invalidated by its supposed support of the status quo. It is beyond the grasp of what we can only truly know from experience. According to the neopragmatists, metaphysics speaks a moral language that exalts privilege. It denies the pragmatic idea that all knowledge is contingent and can only be proven truthful through scientific inquiry.

The leaders of today's deconstructionist movement in literature -- the linguistic pragmatists Richard Rorty and Stanley Fish -- argue that our culture is confined to the conventions and contingencies of language which preclude us from participating in any sort of associative life capable of addressing the problems of social injustice. For Rorty and Fish, an unbridgeable gulf exists between our private and public life; the best that any citizen can do is to sympathize with another person's own context of injustice. Others scholars, such as philosophers Hilary Putnam and Richard Bernstein, and historian James T. Kloppenberg, see themselves following more closely in philosopher John Dewey's footsteps. Putnam argues that Dewey's pragmatism is itself an epistemological foundation for democracy, and his claim is supported by other neopragmatists who look to
reconstruct Dewey's faith in a community of inquiry and social action as the antidote to poverty and social inequality. 5

While only Rorty and Fish concede that their kind of pragmatism leads to subjectivism, all neopragmatists today must admit that the pursuit of the pragmatic method entails some degree of relativism. Such relativism must be the bane of any coherent theory that aims to accurately perceive the structures of power and evil in today's society. The harshest critics of pragmatism go even farther than this. Analytic philosophers argue that in asserting that moral knowledge has no philosophical foundation, the neopragmatists expose our culture to intolerance, injustice, and a disrespect for civil rights.

Rorty would argue that the "right" conceptions of reason, of science, of thought, of knowledge, of morality expressed in their essence cannot defend us against irrationalist resentment and hatred. To this, philosopher Jeffrey Stout responds that we cannot be responsible citizens and retain value neutral opinions on the practices of torture or terrorism until these practices are tested in experience. Putnam, Bernstein, and Kloppenberg recognize this ethical dilemma and wish to retain Dewey's concern for ethics without relinquishing the spirit of his effort to deconstruct traditional metaphysics.

But can we abandon the metaphysical approach and still address the problems of power and authority in the new century? Or as Jeffrey Stout states,

"the concern is whether we can be pragmatists without, as a practical matter, ultimately betraying the very ends that pragmatic liberalism is meant to serve by having too little to say in the face of tyranny or by losing access to our own culture's reservoir of moral reasons."  

It was this balance that Niebuhr and Lippmann envisioned as the theoretical foundation for a modern conception of evil. This thesis seeks to demonstrate that Niebuhr and Lippmann located the roots of evil in human nature and applied this knowledge pragmatically to explain politics. Far from constraining the spirit of liberalism or advocating static theories, Niebuhr and Lippmann understood politics in a dynamic and organic sense. They recognized that rigid theories and dogmatic movements in history which were self-righteously held above all others revealed the very essence of evil. Such self righteousness demonstrated the human tendency to champion one's interests as supreme -- a tendency which could easily degenerate into moral blame and a blindness to the potential for evil in the self.

Chapter One aims to show how Niebuhr and Lippmann's response to fascism and Communism during the depression was informed by their qualified commitment to pragmatism. It compares several of their early studies on political and moral behavior that sought to construct an ethical basis for politics. These works ultimately invested the mainstream liberal intellectual community with a moral language that could find a meaning for the evil of Nazism and Communism, the latter which so many liberals seemed unwilling to confront.

Chapter Two examines Niebuhr and Lippmann's response to isolationism and pacifism at the outbreak of World War II and their development of a realist

critique during the war. It shows how they moved from a progressive or radical politics to argue that the optimism of the isolationist movement was the most conspicuous example of how absolutist doctrines dominated the minds of American foreign policy makers at mid-century. A hallmark of the realist school, especially as Niebuhr shaped it through his work in the Union for Democratic Action, was its tough minded approach to radical ideologies such as Communism and its awareness of the dangers of self-interest among groups. Niebuhr made some poignant observations about the Holocaust's moral implications on the United States, which are detailed in the second section of Chapter Two. The chapter's final section compares Niebuhr and Lippmann's last philosophical works before the end of the war, each which tried to identify the cause of evil in Nazism and find a workable plan for organizing competing power interests in the post-war world.

A concluding chapter examines Niebuhr and Lippmann's legacy after the war. It attempts to show that each made a significant contribution to how policy makers and liberal intellectuals during the Cold War would respond to the horrors of the Korean and Vietnam wars, and how each built a political philosophy that significantly altered the dialogue of debate over the nature of evil.
Which theory of democracy gives us the best measure of our own capacity for evil? Half a century ago, many historians, psychologists, and social scientists believed an objective claim to knowledge underpinned a consensus of democratic values. Scholars conceived of democracy in relation to the tyranny of authoritarian dictatorships. They talked about its foundation of civil rights and liberties as being self-evident, unconditional, and absolute. They doubted the viability of popular democracy because their experience of fascism and Communism taught them that majoritarian politics produced intolerance and injustice, not freedom, liberty, and equality. Beyond this, they believed that the essential and unifying characteristic of liberalism was its individualism, which made the prospects for majoritarian democracy bleak if not impossible.

Today in academia, ideological discord has replaced the Cold War consensus and the old notion of objectivity. Postmodern scholars claim that there can be no coherent foundation of knowledge; the idea of one truth is an illusion since all knowledge is contingent and relative to one's individual experiences. Neopragmatist intellectuals -- those who believe philosopher John Dewey's pragmatism may offer a foundation for participatory democracy, retain a faith in liberalism that offers a means to transcend the relativism and nihilism of the postmodernists.

Neopragmatists such as philosophers Hilary Putnam and Richard Bernstein, and historians James Kloppenberg and Robert Westbrook all support the anti-foundationalism of the postmodern position. As intellectuals of the 1960's generation, they view Cold War liberalism as not only the abandonment of
communitarian values, but as a history of oppression, victimization, and a search for a community of protest and resistance against the status quo. For these scholars, Dewey's vision of democracy based in the virtues of open dialogue, experimentation, and an ongoing collective inquiry is the key to overcoming social conflict. Since no agreement can be reached on one standard by which we can judge evil, the standard must be the search for a standard itself, what Kloppenberg supports as the perspective of hermeneutics.  

Bernstein and Putnam have both stated that Dewey was too optimistic about a community of inquiry resolving deep seeded social problems. But their defense of Dewey is flawed by his own circular logic and mired in the very individualistic traps they seek to avoid. Bernstein, for example, recognized that Dewey "underestimates the conflict, dissonance, and asymmetrical power relationships that disrupt 'the harmonious whole.'" Yet he affirms Dewey's contention that more democracy can fix democracy: "it is precisely because of those conflicts, between groups run so deep, that it becomes all the more urgent to develop those habits and virtues by which we can intelligently seek to negotiate and reconcile differences." Not only does this avoid the problem of communities acting maliciously, but as historian John Diggins argues, it leads to a contradiction. More democracy in practical terms, maintains Diggins, means more politics, more bureaucratization, structures, and systems -- all of which further removes the public from democratic participation. Putnam retreats to Charles Sanders Peirce's individualistic ethical dilemma and philosopher William James' concept of faith in 

---

"The Will to Believe" in order to compensate for what he describes as Dewey's "less satisfactory" moral philosophy. 8

What Dewey failed to see, and what the neopragmatists do not address, are some insights that the neo-orthodox intellectuals share with the postmodernists today: knowledge is corrupted by power at all levels of the community, that the language of democracy (words like justice and freedom) obscure hidden motives, and that irony shows us how intentions and actions often contradict each other. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's thoughts on Deweyan liberals still ring true today:

Their inability to discover the corruption of self-interest in reason or in man's rational pursuits; and to measure the spiritual dimension of man's inhumanity and cruelty, gives an air of sentimentality to the learning of our whole liberal culture. Thus we have no guidance amid the intricacies of modern power politics, except as the older disciplines, less enamored of the 'methods of natural science,' and the common sense of the man in the street, supply the necessary insights. 9

This chapter argues that the insights of two Cold War liberal intellectuals about the uneasy relationship between power and ethics in politics and the limitations of community action presents a more realistic perspective on the problem of evil. Journalist Walter Lippmann's and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's critical approach to democracy offers our best hope for reconstructing an objective liberalism that can defend against evil in the new century. As universalist critics of the prevailing


liberal optimism of the 1930's, Lippmann and Niebuhr pioneered a balanced perspective in liberalism which approached the problem of power realistically; it sought to expose the limits of human nature in perceiving the temptation toward power and sin.  

In an era of mass politics and growing extremist movements, Lippmann and Niebuhr were the two most prominent critics of majoritarian democracy and the idea that community action would inevitably lead to good ends. During the 1930's, Lippmann, Niebuhr, and those who wrote for Partisan Review and Modern Quarterly represented a small contingent within the liberal community who not only saw clearly the evils of fascism but were not embarrassed to criticize Communism. Both Lippmann and Niebuhr were universalists because they believed in an essential structure or foundation for knowledge. But since they also saw knowledge as contingent, recognizing the capacity for human creativity within an unfinished universe, they were pragmatists who contributed to the relativist climate of the inter-war period.

Niebuhr and Lippmann's understanding of the origins of evil was shaped by their conviction that self-interest invariably dominated politics. They believed that the attainment of social justice required insight into how power and consciousness mixed. Both held the conviction that the fate of American democracy was tied to foreign affairs, and that the abstract moral policies of Wilsonian progressivism had failed to meet the crises of international politics.

Following World War I, both Niebuhr and Lippmann came to believe that President Woodrow Wilson's politics had represented a mere caricature of

---

10The term "liberal" will be used in this paper in the broad sense. It includes fellow travelers, Russian sympathizers, and those of the "progressive" left, left-of-center intellectuals, such as Niebuhr, more economically conservative liberals, such as Lippmann.
liberalism. Where the hallmark of liberal democracy had been the flexibility to mold society toward just ends, Wilsonian politics, thought Lippmann and Niebuhr, operated by a certain inflexibility, a certain optimism tending toward self-righteousness that glossed over the complexities of politics through abstract moral values. It was a liberalism blind to the limits of human nature and the tragedy of history.

Lippmann's and Niebuhr's early works attacked this post-war brand of liberalism and sought to discover an alternative moral structure -- one which would give Americans a more realistic sense of power structures and a more complex understanding of human motives. Both Niebuhr and Lippmann posited that unlimited power causing social injustice would go unrecognized if liberalism did not undergo a major reconstruction. A key problem that each tried to resolve was how individuals and groups could act morally when tempted by power, and how the principles of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity could be made viable within a modern political context. They hoped for a purer quality of justice where political theory matched the social realities of the modern era. Without such a modern framework, the poverty, political corruption, the budding danger of totalitarianism in the 1930's would continue to go unrecognized and unchallenged.

For Niebuhr, these ideas developed from his inner-city experiences and travels abroad. Niebuhr was born on June 21, 1892, in Wright City, Missouri, into a hard-working and pious German immigrant family. His father, Gustav, was a strong-willed pastor of the German Evangelical Church. Following in his father’s footsteps, Niebuhr completed the later part of his early schooling at Eden Seminary. He graduated from Yale with a B.D. and an M.A. in 1915, where upon he began a thirteen year pastorate at Bethel Church in Detroit. His years between
1915 and his appointment at Union Theological Seminary in 1928, when he was first exposed to impoverished labor conditions and racial unrest, were critical to his developing understanding of how power relations operated in society. From his visit to France in July of 1923, he learned first hand of the hatreds and brutalities that infested the Ruhr Valley in the wake of the Versailles peace settlement. During 1926 and 1927, he led a movement which exposed Henry Ford's corrupt labor practices and his "humanitarian pretensions." 11 When Niebuhr moved to New York in 1928 to join the faculty at Union Theological Seminary, he left with a greater appreciation of how the moral pretensions of both groups and individuals complicated the perceptions of social injustice.

Niebuhr's Moral Man and Immoral Society (1932) critiqued how individual and collective power operated in society, and it was his first effort to apply the concept of original sin to politics. What Niebuhr found dysfunctional in politics was the inability of liberal idealists to articulate the most deceptive forms of immorality they encountered -- the power relations that existed between groups. Niebuhr's 1960 preface to Moral Man affirmed his continuing belief in its thesis -- that "the Liberal Movement both religious and secular seemed to be unconscious of the basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives, whether races, classes, or nations." 12 The idea that majorities behaved more immorally than individuals was a reality of political life that Niebuhr thought eluded the liberal vocabulary.

Here Niebuhr targeted the progressive optimism of social scientist, educators, and theologians within the liberal community, what historian Daniel Rice referred to as "the Social Gospel-Dewey amalgam." 13 The ideas of philosopher John Dewey and those of the liberal evangelical Protestants forged the dominant trend in liberalism during the early twentieth century. Niebuhr held that both Dewey and the Social Gospel theologians believed that love and reason, which composed the essence of human nature, made social progress and the ultimate destruction of sin inevitable. According to the Social Gospel movement, evil became an eradicable social blemish once human beings realized God's kingdom on earth.

For Niebuhr, the idea that love was a natural panacea for social evil evaded "the hard work of the politics of justice." The achievement of justice through love was complicated by the dialectical relationship between the two. Love was a moral requirement which both satisfied and destroyed the conditions for justice. It satisfied the conditions for justice "because the obligation of life to life is more fully met in love than is possible in a scheme of equity and justice." It destroyed the conditions for justice because "love makes an end of the nicely calculated less and more of structures of justice. It does not carefully arbitrate between the needs of the self and of the other, since it meets the needs of the other without concern for the self." Niebuhr thought power needed to be balanced in moral terms in order to properly relate love to justice. By relying too much in the absolute value of love as a vehicle for social justice, social gospel adherents espoused a utopian

---

position that overlooked the problem of self love. Forgetting that self love was the root of evil, liberals had lost their self-critical perspective.  

Dewey’s faith in the politics of love and reason, insisted Niebuhr, proved no more realistic a method for solving the problems of social injustice. Precisely because it was grounded too firmly in naturalism and Enlightenment thought, Dewey’s philosophy could only illuminate the proactive side of human nature, not the multiplicity of motives behind human action. Targeting liberalism’s preeminent spokesman, Niebuhr rejected Dewey’s concept of a rationally based associative life leading inevitably to self-realization and individual growth. This concept assumed the existence of a highly intelligent community making inherently rational and good decisions. Such a community, thought Niebuhr, could never exit, not only because human beings possessed certain irrational and irrepressible impulses that compelled them toward injustice, but also because economic classes were limited by their own narrow perspectives. They were trapped by the prejudices of their self-contained economic environments. These groups lived comfortably and thus failed to see the social injustice around them; they lived individually and thus overlooked the selfishness of class relations.

---

15 Niebuhr’s caricature of Dewey’s optimism, a tendency which Niebuhr thought was naively based in Dewey’s commitment rationalism, is now commonly accepted. Richard Bernstein observed that Dewey seldom used the word “reason” to describe the potential of human creativity. Rather, he thought of it in more fluid terms: “Though Dewey was committed to the belief that all human beings can develop their ‘creative intelligence’ and practical judgement, he did not think that rational discussion itself is sufficient to bring about genuine social reform...He always stresses the ongoing creative task of nurturing the habits that can only be sustained in critical, open, tolerant communities.” (Dickstein, p. 149).
16 John Dewey, Liberalism and Social Action (1935), passim; Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society passim.
By the late 1920's and early 1930's, Niebuhr's growing revulsion to the sentimental and idealistic tenets of liberalism was one factor that led him to Marxism. Marx's cynical view of power in the hands of the privileged classes, and his exposition of bourgeois moral pretensions, helped Niebuhr clarify how the capitalist system both produced and perpetuated social evil. The privileged middle classes -- the proprietors of capitalism -- sustained their disproportionate share of wealth and power by presenting their own interests to society as a model of absolute moral behavior.

Niebuhr applied Marx's insights about power and pretension to Communism, and found that the Communists had been equally naive as bourgeois liberals. The proletariat class proved no more altruistic or imaginative than the bourgeoisie since both used absolute moral standards rhetorically to justify their own power interests. Direct comparison exposed a common hypocrisy. Munitions manufacturers, for example, might claim that dissolving unions during wartime was within the national interest. This proposition, argued Niebuhr, effectively masked the self-interest of the capitalist class and its entrenched power atop the hierarchical ladder. The proletariat was no more realistic in its effort to create a classless society. Despite its assumed role as the ultimate arbiters of social justice and equality, the actions of the working class were no less governed by self-interest. For Niebuhr, such self-interest underpinned all human action and always interfered with the impartial implementation of justice.

In both cases, the pervasiveness of human sin complicated the use of reason in creating conditions of justice and equality. The selfish behavior common to all individuals and groups convinced Niebuhr that evil originated not from social institutions, but from within the dark recesses of human nature. Niebuhr's insight
into the contradictions between Marxist theory and Communism -- that its perfectionism obscured man's tendency to serve himself without regard to the whole -- made Niebuhr's revulsion to utopianism a central component of his social ethics.

For Niebuhr, the utopian delusions present in Marxism were also expressed in the reigning pacifism of the 1930's. Pacifists, he thought, erred in their belief that war itself was the greatest evil facing America. Niebuhr, a pacifist himself from 1923 until he resigned as chair of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) in 1934, challenged the perfectionist tendencies of the movement by illuminating the motives behind coercion in politics. Pacifists simplified the connection between motive and outcome. The idea that "violence is a natural and inevitable expression of ill-will, and non-violence of good will, and that violence is therefore intrinsically evil and non-violence intrinsically good" imposed too rational a structure on a politics made irrational and tragic by the contradictions in human nature. Despite their best intentions, thought Niebuhr, human beings were inherently selfish and could unconsciously act unjustly. The same pride that foiled the actions of individuals was magnified in the group. Since nations always acted first within their own self-interests, rational and moral appeals of good will among nations would ultimately fail. Only methods of coercion could effectively counter national egoism.

Some of Niebuhr's contemporaries, such as political scientist Hans Morgenthau, who adopted his realist insights into the behavior of individuals, classes, and nations, tended to focus exclusively on his political thought, thereby minimizing the neo-orthodox Christianity that so prominently shaped his politics. In fact, what legitimized Niebuhr's perspective on evil was his faith in God. This is
illustrated by his position on moral relativism. As a Marxist (albeit a disillusioned one) in the early 1930's, Niebuhr understood that the moral hypocrisies of a liberal democracy made the particularistic elements of a pluralistic system an essential ingredient of social justice and a weapon against the status quo. Yet Niebuhr was also wary of the implications of relativism that could too easily lead to absolutist theories driven by the will to power in human nature. Absolute moral statements based on reason alone were always relative. Americans needed a moral standard capable of transcending human self-interest. Rejecting the absolute doctrines of Communism and fascism, Niebuhr stressed that only God's conception of love and justice was impartial enough to overcome evil. He argued that only the Biblical view of human history could fully comprehend "man in his strength and weakness." Neither the optimistic world view of Marxism and liberalism, nor the pessimism of fascism, served the cause of democracy. Marxists and liberals correctly perceived that man was a moral creature capable of achieving a degree of community and social harmony. Yet they underestimated the human impulse to power. Fascists were more realistic in this sense since they accurately gauged man's self-serving nature, but failed to account for man's moral capacities. 17

Niebuhr stressed that the Christian conception of human nature provided a more solid foundation for democracy than the optimism of twentieth century liberalism. Yet he also warned against a broad application of religion to politics. That nations and social groups had generally failed to approximate the principles of justice and love indicated that religious moralists were unrealistic in demanding that the "law of Christ" be operable in national policy. "Religious idealism may qualify national policies, as much as rational idealism," thought Niebuhr, "but this

qualification can never completely eliminate the selfish, brutal and antisocial elements, which express themselves in all inter-group life.”

Despite the fact that religion could never completely eliminate power from society in its battle with evil, it was still necessary that "every genuine passion for social justice will always contain a religious element within it...without the ultra-rational hopes and passions of religion, no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible."  

Thus, for Niebuhr, the challenge of mitigating evil and finding a moral standard in politics required a balance between the relative and the absolute. That balance reflected Niebuhr's duel commitment to pragmatism and moral objectivity. Niebuhr was a pragmatist in the tradition of the philosopher William James and John Dewey. Yet he also realized that enlightenment thought too readily assumed that there were adequate checks on human impulses in reason and nature. Did individuals and communities possess enough moral wisdom to be trusted with self-government? For Niebuhr and a growing number of intellectuals on the non-Communist Left, the rise of Nazism and the exposure of Stalin's crimes in the 1930's verified their skepticism of majoritarian democracy. As the menace of Nazi extremism in the late 1930's seemed to threaten the very survival of democracy, Niebuhr's revulsion to moral relativism grew stronger and he sharpened his idea of sin as product of human freedom.

---

18 Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society p. 75.
19 Ibid, 80.
Lippmann, like Niebuhr, began his career as a socialist but ultimately made his most important contribution as a critic of liberalism. Walter Lippmann's early career followed an active and precocious path. Born September 23, 1889, in New York City to parents of Jewish background, he grew up in a lower-middle-class and staunchly Republican family. He graduated from New York's private Sach's Collegiate Institute in 1906 and received his A.B. degree from Harvard in 1910. Lippmann, who held a number of key governmental advisory positions throughout his political career, began humbly as an assistant to muckraker Lincoln Stephens and had a brief stint working on socialist George R. Lunn's mayoral campaign in Philadelphia. It was the desirable combination of his left liberal politics and realistic application of idealism to public policy that led President Wilson to select him for "the Inquiry" -- a team of intellectuals assigned in the fall of 1917 to draw up the geographical boundaries for post-war Europe, a project which was to be incorporated into Wilson's 14 points and the Versailles peace process. It was this work that marked the beginning of Lippmann's on again off again attraction to Wilsonian politics throughout his career.

Lippmann's career blossomed after the war. By 1928, he had completed nine books and held the position of editor of the New York World. Of his early career, Lippmann's most important works were Public Opinion (1922) and The Phantom Public (1925), the latter in which he challenged the viability of self-rule. The average citizen, he thought, received filtered information from the press and politicians, and thus lacked the specialized knowledge to claim the reigns of democratic leadership. For Lippmann, the fact that the masses were particularly impressionable to stereotypes and sensations was key to explaining the myth of the "omnicompetent citizen" and the dangers of mass politics. Pluralism lacked a
central authority to define the concept of a public. Given democracy's centrifugal nature, the only viable democratic system was a strictly representative one -- a representative system informed by the work of experts who could articulate the common good through their specialized knowledge of state affairs and popular needs. 20

Lippmann, like Niebuhr, recognized that Americans failed to articulate the shades of evil they encountered because the course of public affairs lacked a coherent moral framework. The social structures that once invested citizens with moral insight -- the patriarchal society and theocratic government -- became the very structures that obscured moral insight in the modern context. Americans now harbored an "unbelief" in authority which made the ancient moral insights seem archaic and defunct. Despite important scientific and technological advances, modernism -- or the new cultural habits and customs engendered within a technologically and industrially advanced society -- had corroded the moral fabric of a once pious and organic community. Trading the farm for the factory, the modern democratic citizen, now more secular, mechanical minded, and atomized, had no use for the old structures of authority. The idea of authority itself seemed irrevocably tied to an antiquated system or hierarchical values, and thus an obstacle to individual progress. The remedy, thought Lippmann, was to separate the idea of authority from power, "to disassociate virtue from its traditional sanctions and the metaphysical framework which has to this point supported it." Lippmann

called for a new moral structure based on human needs, since "the ancient premises of morality have faded into mere acknowledgments." 21

For Lippmann, the public's inability to express and categorize evil resulted as much from a lack of insight into human behavior as it did from the absence of a firm moral structure. Philosophically, the problem of evil in history was not solved by the classical rationalists' theory of reward and punishment. The idea that evil could be eliminated by punishing wicked men wrongly assumed that only wicked men committed evil acts. It failed to account for "the pain which is suffered by those who according to all human standards are innocent, by children and animals for example." When America was still a God-fearing nation, the problem of evil was easily explained as part of God's Will. Its occurrence could not be questioned because God's designs superseded human aspirations. Thus for Lippmann, evil could only be overcome by accepting the fact that the world did not conform to one's individual desires. The key to human survival was to realize that each person's will was only one part of a universal whole.

In prescribing a humanized structure of moral authority as the basis for public policy, Lippmann wished to avoid the trappings of absolutism. Affirming his pragmatism and eschewing formalism, he maintained that democracy should be based on human needs and flexible enough to justify the complexity of the human condition. From a humanistic perspective, notions of good and evil were relative to individual experience and thus carried no objective value in themselves. Since not all people were motivated in the same way by the same impulses and instincts, there could be no categorical definition of what constituted an evil act. This idea

of evil as a mutable concept capable of being mitigated through human initiative revealed Lippmann's continuing faith in the scientific method, which had played prominently in Drift and Mastery (1914). Although his 1929 work focused primarily on knowledge and piety, it also revealed his old progressive conviction that human will and action would progressively mold society to better ends. 22

That evil only existed in relation to individual experience, however, also posed a problem for Lippmann: once evil became a quantifiable and destructible thing, it failed to instill fear. When pluralistic, relativistic currents eclipsed the universalist framework, evil lost its force as a structuring social principle. Lippmann seemed torn on the issue. On the one hand, his pragmatic solution saved him from being nihilistic or skeptical about the future of democracy, thereby thwarting the critics of Public Opinion who had argued otherwise. Lippmann recognized the creative potential of modernism, (by which he meant the ability to mold human growth toward greater social and economic ends), and he believed that liberal democracy contained the mechanisms to overcome social injustice. "By disconnecting evil from the theory of divine government, modern man has made evil a less dreadful, even manageable problem." The social injustices of the modern world, insisted Lippmann, "cease to be signs and portents symbolizing the whole of human destiny and become specific and distinguishable situations which have to be dealt with...As long as all evils are believed somehow to fit into a divine, if mysterious plan, the effort to eradicate them must seem on the whole futile, and even impious." 23

Clearly, the problem of evil as an absolute and immutable concept disturbed Lippmann's progressive sensibility. Yet he also recognized that once perceived as conditional and manageable, evil lost its power to instill fear in the observer. Without the elusive presence of Satan, what was left of a public sense of morals? Once individuals believed they had the ability to determine their own destiny, he thought, they "destroy the awfulness of evil...In abandoning the notion that evil has to be reconciled with a theory of how the world is governed, we rob it of its universal significance. We deflate it." 24

This imbalance between the relative and the absolute was no better manifested than during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when America became a culture of paranoia and scapegoating. The U.S. Supreme Court sanctioned segregation of blacks and whites in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson decision; legislators in 1921 and 1924 enacted federal laws restricting the immigration of foreign born peoples; A. Mitchell Palmer directed raids against radical subversives in 1919; popular theories of phrenology and eugenics promised to categorize and root out the unsavory elements of democratic society -- all these things reflected a new way of thinking about evil. As author Andrew Delbanco demonstrated, the manipulation of xenophobia and racial fear that underlay the progressive movement placed evil in the external or foreign enemy. The old equipment of transcendental morals -- God, providence, destiny, and the devil embodying concepts of sin and pride and the Fall -- were discarded because they failed to relate to contemporary experience. The sin that now emanated from the city became exclusively foreign -- insidious, but recognizable.25

24Ibid, 137.
In essence, this made the problem of perceiving evil a matter of strengthening the moral fabric of society by finding a balance between the relative and the absolute. Just as the ancient order preserved an individual's morality by making sin universal, so too could the modern era re-integrate the old religious insights to preserve morality. Though modern man no longer believed in angels and devils, these biblical symbols once stood for "the evil and blessings which we still encounter." Allegorical references in the Bible to temptations, sin, disease, pain, and sufferings were true to life because they spoke of the human condition.  

In refurbishing the myths of the ancient order as a means to scientifically reassert humanistic values back into politics, Lippmann wanted a modern sense of evil abstract enough to engage the human imagination, but disinterested enough to avoid the dogmatism of the progressive reformer. If Lippmann relied on the relativity of human experience in order to make the distinction between good and evil something "which men themselves recognize and understand," he also knew that in order to grasp the nature of evil we needed to believe in its abstract and universal qualities.

It was the insights of humanism -- the ability to examine the self as well as society, the knowledge that moral laws were only universal if they balanced one interest with another -- that Lippmann found wanting in the Wilsonian conception of evil: "The spiritual error which underlies the Wilsonian misconception," he argued, "is the error of forgetting that we are men and of thinking that we are gods. We are not gods. We do not have the omniscience to discover a new moral law and the omnipotence to impose it upon mankind...We are mere mortals with

---

27 Ibid, 137.
limited power and little universal wisdom.” As Lippmann, Niebuhr, and anti-Communist liberals would come to see, human pride and the will-to-power were also the sins that fueled the evils of Nazism and Stalinism.

Confronting the Evil of Totalitarianism: 1930-1939

Lippmann's and Niebuhr's call for moral responsibility in politics and a greater awareness to the problem of evil alerted Americans to the dangers of authoritarian movements during the 1930's. Their interpretation of authoritarianism as a moral crisis and an international threat to American democracy helped to mold an unconditional intolerance to totalitarianism -- a theory which linked the foreign policy objectives and the authoritarian nature of the Nazi and Soviet regimes. To understand the significance of this theory and its impact on the Cold War era, it is necessary to give a brief explanation of its influence on the liberal community and its connection with neo-orthodox view of evil.

Lippmann's and Niebuhr's refusal to separate what non-Communist liberals perceived to be the evils of fascism from Communism -- the expansionist character of the two regimes, their repression of basic human rights and civil liberties, the similarity of their bureaucratic structure and state capitalism -- distinguished them from the optimism of progressive liberals who saw Communism as the answer to an ailing American capitalist system.

This is not to say that Lippmann and Niebuhr held identical views about the nature of the Soviet Union's political philosophy and foreign policy objectives.

28Walter Lippmann, U.S. War Aims (Boston: Little Brown, 1944), passim.
Lippmann throughout the 1930's maintained that Russia was no different than the despotic dictatorships of Germany and Italy, and therefore offered few redeeming qualities for a liberal democracy. He argued that Russia's planned economy and dominant military goals made it antithetical in nature to a liberal democracy. Like all "modern national war economies," argued Lippmann, Soviet Russia was characterized by "the centralized administration, the dictatorship and the terror, the planning of production, the conscription of labor, and the rationing of consumption." Cursed by the geographical proximity of its enemies, Russia since the Bolshevik Revolution in July 1918 was forced to organize "not to improve the popular standard of life as rapidly as possible but to make Russia a formidable military power." 29

All these qualities, thought Lippmann, characterized Russia, like Italy and Germany, as a primitive society which "[used] the power of the state to direct, and in the last analysis to administer, the production and the consumption of wealth." The liberal society, by contrast, "uses the power of the state to preserve and promote that freedom of exchange which is the essential principle of the new mode of production." Thus Lippmann saw two societies diametrically opposed to each other in both economic and political outlook. He found it difficult to understand the attraction of Communism in America. For Lippmann, it was an "incredible paradox" that caused the progressive reformer, "men who have fought gallantly for the civil rights of cranks and fools in America to condone the suppression of all civil rights in Russia."30

Niebuhr shared Lippmann's moral revulsion of Stalin's expropriation of the kulaks and his general abuse of power. Niebuhr's impressions of the Soviet Union began to coalesce in the early 1930's. In August, 1930, Niebuhr visited Russia during the period of Stalin's first five-year plan, commenting on the poorly managed state-run economy, the degradation and depravity of the lower classes in Moscow, and "the bitterness which centuries of oppression distilled in the hearts of peasants and workers." 31 Niebuhr always saw clearly that the Marxist principle of equality, to whatever degree it existed under Communism, came at the expense of liberty. He also recognized that liberalism had brought more liberty than equality in the West.

As the head of the Fellowship for Socialist Christians, and later the founder of Radical Religion in the fall of 1935, Niebuhr was committed to a radical politics that weighed the strengths and weaknesses of both liberalism and Communism in ways that Lippmann could not. Niebuhr in Moral Man observed Karl Marx's failure to see the possibilities of social reform within liberal democracies and to predict the abuses of power among Communist bureaucrats. But Niebuhr praised Marx for being "realistic in maintaining that disproportion of power is the real root of social injustice." 32

Niebuhr continued to give Russia an even-handed assessment during the war. Always aware of the common Communist and liberal imperialistic impulse, he nevertheless distinguished the Soviet Union for its utopian moral outlook, an idealism that proved a central component in the passion of achieving social justice. Near the end of World War II, Niebuhr advocated the creation of a mutual security

32Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, p. 163.
system over Lippmann's spheres of influence plan. He retained an idealism that proved a foil to those such as Lippmann and political scientist Hans Morgenthau who were more deeply wedded to a tough-minded power politics.

Although Lippmann more than Niebuhr was willing to link the Nazi and Soviet regimes, both accepted the basic moral premises of the totalitarian theory. It was this conflation that helped to forge an important response to the politics of the Popular Front, a pro-democratic organization which was generally sympathetic to the goals and methods Soviet Russia. Those intellectuals who continued to support Russia in the late 1930's as a democratic state in waiting were later accused as apologists for Stalin's purges, his brutalization of the peasant population, and Russia's expansionist goals which became evident to a greater number of observers after the war. Like Niebuhr, the Popular Front radicals were disillusioned with the capitalist system and the future of democratic reform. But unlike Niebuhr, Lippmann, and those on the non-Communist left who invoked a realist criticism of the Soviet Union, the progressive liberals often criticized capitalism without thinking cynically about power; they were always distrustful of capitalist power and privilege but rarely questioned the self-interest underlying the motives behind radical politics. The progressive idea that power could be used virtuously in the hands of the enlightened fostered a relativist notion of evil which both Lippmann and Niebuhr eschewed.

The idea that Nazism and Communism comprised a monolithic enemy of demonic proportions, an evil that conspired to destroy American democratic values, formed a world view central to Cold War policy and the liberal anti-Communism that underpinned it. Historians who have examined the origins of this left-right conflation and the effects of its image upon intellectuals, policy makers,
and the public draw different conclusions. All these studies, however, demonstrate that while the totalitarian image obscured the differing ideological and foreign policy objectives of each regime, it correctly characterized authoritarianism as a moral threat facing the United States. Moreover, they depict a popular idea of totalitarianism that underscores Lippmann's and Niebuhr's position -- that totalitarianism posed an evil to the West that eluded observation and control.

The first to assess the impact of the totalitarian image were Les K. Adler and Thomas G. Paterson in 1970. The authors argued that the phrase "Red Fascism," intended as an antidote to postwar international tension and a means of illuminating the illiberal nature of Communism, blurred some important differences between the two regimes -- namely their relative militaristic goals, their policies on international trade, and their relative openness to accommodation with the West. In a response to the Adler-Paterson piece, Daniel M. Smith argued that the stereotype of an "evil authoritarianism-totalitarianism" enjoining Russia and Germany developed not during World War II, but during World War I. It was then that President Wilson and several of his cabinet members, namely Secretary of State Robert Lansing and presidential advisor Edward M. House, linked Bolshevism and German militarism in a sinister "Prussian" conspiracy against American democracy, thereby obscuring their true ideologies and foreign policy objectives. 33

Thomas Maddux's study, which examined the rhetoric of the press corps, demonstrated that while Adler and Paterson justly criticized the Red Fascism

---

comparison "as an historical interpretation [and] as a theory to predict Stalin's behavior," the authors missed its moral appeal for Americans during the 1930's. As Maddux contended, "despite Soviet rhetoric and liberal hopes that the Soviet Union was moving toward representative government with respect for individual human rights, the press recognized that Stalinism really shared more similarities with Nazism than with democracy with respect to dictatorship, control of the individual, and reliance on terror and purges." 34

Maddux's comment demonstrated not only that there was a receptive audience for anti-Communism during the 1930's; it also showed the impact of liberal anti-Communist in restoring a sense of evil to the political rhetoric of the 1930's. By warning against the totalitarian threat during the depression and of the inherent human tendency toward evil, anti-Communist liberals did more to illuminate shades of evil than the optimistic liberalism of the left-wing of the New Deal and those intellectuals sympathetic to Communism.

Assessing American intellectuals' "discovery" of European totalitarianism during the 1930's, historian Robert A. Skotheim confirmed that the small pocket of anti-Communist liberalism that Niebuhr and Lippmann helped to build during the depression laid the basis for vital center liberalism of the Cold War:

The radical thought of some of the intellectuals, and the reform achievements of the New Dealers, have been properly emphasized in the histories and recollections of the depression. Nevertheless, from a later perspective, the long-range intellectual significance of American social thought in the 1930's does not lie in the decade's preoccupation with

radicalism and reform. It rests rather in the essentially conservative foundations which the 1930's laid for the 1940's and 1950's. 35

By "conservative," Skotheim referred to a moral revulsion to Stalinism which led certain members of the liberal community to think differently about the nature of the Soviet Union. Many of these intellectuals, such as William Henry Chamberlin and Sidney Hook had previously been Communists in the 1920's. This change in values, from moral relativism to a firmer moral objectivity, produced the dominant tone of one of the most influential books for the Cold War era. Historian Arthur Schlesinger's The Vital Center underpinned the ideological foundations for American foreign policy in the post-war world -- its absolute intolerance of totalitarian regimes, its awareness of human sinfulness and the persistence of power relationships in foreign affairs. Schlesinger believed that since author Nathaniel Hawthorne's time, the concept of sin had gradually disappeared from the liberal vocabulary, "fading fast into the world of myth." 36

As pioneers of this centrist position who saw the human potential for both compassion and evil, Lippmann and Niebuhr strove to reestablish this dark and brooding brand of nineteenth century liberalism. In so doing, they forged a politics which illuminated the evils of fascism and laid the foundations for the theory of totalitarianism. Their strident opposition to both fascism and Communism developed as a result of a key shift in their thinking -- a shift from a progressive or radical philosophy to a more neo-orthodox or conservative position. Where relativism and scientific method had once served a useful purpose in exposing the

depth of social injustice, a revulsion to moral relativism now best illuminated the existential roots of evil in the late inter-war period.  

By the late 1930's, the developing news of Stalin's purges led Lippmann and Niebuhr to characterize totalitarianism in more demonic terms. This change built upon a long-standing conviction about the political nature of the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1930's, they had consistently recognized the moral failures of Communism when most liberal intellectuals, afraid of dividing the left at a moment of international crisis, refrained from criticism. Some key and rather distinguishing issues heightened Lippmann's and Niebuhr's awareness to the evils of totalitarianism. For Lippmann, it was the influence of the Austrian economists and a growing aversion to the authoritarian implications of collectivism. For Niebuhr, the moral failure of radical politics, his sensitivity to the horrific Nazi crimes against the Jews, and a growing attraction to Augustinian theology helped to mold his conception of original sin. By linking the evils of fascism and Communism to the moral pretensions of human beings, both Lippmann and Niebuhr contributed to the image of totalitarianism as a permanent and malignant danger facing the United States -- one that posed an international threat that would challenge the West for years to come.

---

Hitlerism--A Devil's Brew

By the early 1930's, Niebuhr and Lippmann, like most American intellectuals, had few illusions about fascism's antithetical relationship to democracy -- its complete sublimation of the individual will and its absolute control of all state functions. Yet unlike many left-leaning intellectuals, Lippmann came to define fascism as a moral failure of Western democracy. Delineating the ethical crisis posed by fascism and the spiritual deficiency of liberalism, Lippmann and Niebuhr came to a more realistic understanding of the nature of authoritarianism.

Both concluded that fascism, linked to inevitable expansion and war, represented an international threat to American democracy. They differed, however, in their prognostication for the future of fascist movements. Lippmann, who found a transcendent standard in humanism, believed fascism would fail because it sought to suppress the inviolability of the human spirit. Niebuhr's Christian realism, a conservative strand of Protestantism which recognized both the compassionate and evil capabilities of human beings, informed his belief that fascism would succeed because it manifested man's original sin in its most cynical form. By the late 1930's, both Niebuhr and Lippmann warned of the evils of fascism and Communism when Popular Front liberals at the time saw only the former. This allowed them to differentiate the principle of evil itself from its relative manifestations. 38

Central to this idea was their universalist conception of sin. Where many liberal theorists, informed by a naturalistic theory of man, identified the sin of fascism as part of some institutional flaw in the politico-economic order, Niebuhr

and Lippmann stressed that the impulse toward violence and hatred was central to the human condition. Fascism, they believed, created a systematized expression for this hatred. As historian John Patrick Diggins noted, the optimism of the prevalent liberal position led most American liberal intellectuals to misinterpret the true nature of fascism and its danger to American democracy. Because of their faith in empirical method and material progress, the majority of liberals "could not subscribe to the religious and humanist interpretations of fascism as the bankruptcy of the spirit rather than the system." 39

Niebuhr's early assessment of Nazism lay between two dominant liberal theories. The first of these, a Marxist position within the liberal community, saw fascism as an extension of capitalism. It assumed not only that the German industrial corporations represented the backbone of the Nazi movement, but also that the capitalists had single-handedly facilitated the Nazi rise to power. Since capitalism produced imperialism, and Nazism demonstrated the same expansionist war-driven tendencies as the Western democracies, the two must be interlinked. A second interpretation, held by left-center liberals such as Alfred Bingham, Stuart Chase, and John Chamberlin, held that fascism represented a revolt of the middle classes against capitalism. Yet in revolting against monopolistic control and the power of wealthy bankers and industrialists, the middle-classes feared that the disbandment of capitalist power would entail social and economic disruption. So they supported a dictatorship to maintain order and ironically preserved the capitalist system of power. 40

39Diggins, 461.
In the late 1920's and early 1930's, Niebuhr identified the evils of Nazism as a final stage in the destruction of capitalism. Since his visit to the Ruhr Valley in July, 1923, Niebuhr pointed to economic factors as the cause of political extremism in Germany; war debts and reparations, high tariffs, and commercial competition from other nations had all contributed to the rise of Nazism. Niebuhr recognized that Hitler's success in derailing the democratic process and liquidating his enemies was due to the economically depraved conditions of Western society. Its lame theory of laissez-faire government, its over-reliance on rational forms of organization which left the individual anxious and atomized, its failure to address the disproportion of wealth and power that wrought insurmountable poverty and injustice for the deprived classes -- all these factors left the masses susceptible to demagogy and emotional appeals to nationalism. Germany, insisted Niebuhr, was a state whose capitalist oppression strained the consciousness of its masses. It represented a microcosm of the West, a country "which seems to stand in the way of modern society purging itself of its weaknesses by one revolutionary venture and arising out of social catastrophe with new health and vigor."  

Niebuhr saw clearly the evil imbedded in the free market capitalism which underpinned both liberalism and fascism. Only the destruction of the capitalist system would yield the necessary conditions for social justice: "The great centers of finance and industry must be taken out of private hands if modern civilization is to live." Yet he also understood the limitations of the collective, and recognized that the impetus for evil went beyond capitalism itself: it resided in the human spirit of vengeance. This was the greater danger of fascism -- not the injustice

---

perpetrated on the victim, but the vengeance inspired in the victim. This
vengeance was inevitable because human beings always confused the relative with
the absolute: "it is impossible for large masses of men to resent injustice as
injustice. They resent the injustice which is done to them." Thus the victim,
driven by an ideal of pure justice, "reveals the egoistic elements in his spirit of
justice, the very elements which change justice into vindictiveness" by failing to
identify the social evils from which he suffers with "the principle of evil itself." 42

Such was the error not only of the fascists but also the proletariat in its
self-righteous behavior. What made the Nazi's crimes barbaric and the proletariat's
quest for justice intolerable was "the weakness of the human imagination." It was
the failure of the self to see beyond itself, to realize "the blindness of vindictiveness
and [its] unconscious absolutizing of partial perspectives." 43 By making the sins
of fascism part of the universal human tendency toward selfishness, Niebuhr was
laying the foundations for the theory of totalitarianism.

As Americans began to learn the details of the Nazi's terrorism against the
Jews, Niebuhr predicted that a long and bloody battle would produce a probable
end to fascism. He argued that the instabilities of a state which found cohesion
through brutality and repression rather than popular support would crumble under
its own contradictions. Though he continued to hope for a radical solution to the
crisis throughout the decade, he harbored increasing doubts about the possibility of
a Socialist revolution rising from the ashes of fascism.

By 1936, Niebuhr began to distance himself from socialism and drew closer
to a liberal democratic position. Several issues pushed him away from his earlier

42 Reinhold Niebuhr, Reflections on the End of an Era (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,
43 Ibid, 104, 186.
radicalism. Most importantly, it became clear to Niebuhr that neither the Socialists
nor the Communists had effectively challenged Hitler's power in Germany. He also
recognized that New Deal reform measures, which had held little attraction for him
in the early 1930's, now seemed to be restoring public confidence and reforming
the capitalist system. In the early 1930's, Niebuhr found Roosevelt's policies too
similar to President Hoover's "intransigent conservatism" and gave only half-
hearted praise to the National Recovery Administration in 1934. The passage of
the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act in 1935 drew his strong approval.
The latter, he noted, had "carried through a law which made collective bargaining
obligatory at a time when there was no labor partner to such a bargaining. It thus
implored labor to organize and take advantage of its rights." 44

Also important to Niebuhr's Christian realism was his growing appreciation
for the ideas of St. Augustine. In the early 1930's, the concept of original sin was
not prevalent in Niebuhr's work. Beginning in 1936, however, he began to explore
in more depth St. Augustine's paradox of the human responsibility for sin despite
its inevitability. St. Augustine's exposition on sin in the City of God impressed
Niebuhr for its willingness to deconstruct human pride and complacency during a
historical period of crisis. During the early 1940's, Niebuhr expounded upon St.
Augustine's concept of self-love as the root of evil, which played prominently in his
two volume magnum opus, The Nature and Destiny of Man. 45

From 1936 onward, sharpening his understanding of how original sin
illuminated political life, Niebuhr defined German fascism more as a moral

44Reinhold Niebuhr, "Socialist Justice in a Defense Economy," Christianity and Society, 6
(Spring 1941), p. 6.
45For Niebuhr's theological influences after 1936, see Charles C. Brown, Niebuhr and His Age
deviation rather than an economic stage in the proletarian revolution. Now that the possibility of international war seemed inevitable and world destruction more likely, Niebuhr began to depict Nazism as a new kind of evil facing the United States. This marked two significant changes in his writings. The first change was the appearance of the new words "horror" and "terror" to describe the oncoming war facing the United States and Nazi anti-Semitism. As Hitler mobilized for an attack on Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939, Niebuhr penned the column "Our Mad World" which pronounced an absence of reason in the "totally chaotic international system." He now considered fascism an evil worse than war, a "new demonic political instrument" forged from the anxiety and desperation of the lower middle classes. Confiscation of Jewish property in Austria revealed an evil indicating "that a new level of barbarism has been reached in the disintegration of our civilization." Assessing the crisis, Niebuhr identified the Nazi evil as a moral flaw of the human soul. The "general reign of terror" against the Jews revealed not the barbarism of the German people, but "the ultimate in man's sadistic tendencies toward his fellow." 46

The second change in Niebuhr's writings was his tendency to see the tribal passions of the masses, what historian Christopher Lasch referred to as "particularism," in exclusively demonic terms. In An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, Niebuhr had found positive value in the "natural sympathy" which combined in man with the "natural egoism." The characteristics of race, family, and nation, while they took a fanatical form under Nazism, could otherwise be a source of virtue in other contexts. In March, 1935, Niebuhr wrote that the

---

"natural egoism" of locales could not be eliminated by human reason, as liberal advocates of the Social Gospel believed. The emotions and passions generated from a loyalty to family, race, and nation were in fact natural expressions of a community. Hate, an irrational and human emotion, represented a necessary ingredient for social justice. Only the further use of coercion could overcome evils driven by the will to power. 47

After Stalin's purge trials began in 1935, Niebuhr wrote exclusively on the demonic aspects of tribalism which he saw manifested in Nazism. He characterized German nationalism as "cheap and dangerous" because of its "tribal polytheism," which itself was anachronistic. Nazism could not support the inherent pluralism of human nature and thus reverted to primitive means to achieve order. Oriented against the anarchy of Western civilization, Nazism centered on the "vindictive, individualistic, and particularistic" nature of the self-determination of nations and the peace settlement at Versailles. Without a realistic understanding of the moral cynicism of fascism, liberal pacifists and educators underestimated the evils of particularism common to all groups: "Democratic idealists solve evil by envisioning a society where individuals relate themselves rationally to other individuals." But this "naive moralism," observed Niebuhr, overlooked "traditional loyalties and sentiments, the lust for power, resentment against injustice, collective pride and hungry stomachs -- the "irrational forces which determine the course of political history." 48

Like Niebuhr, Lippmann, was never drawn to fascist ideology. Throughout the mid and late 1920's, he stood with the small contingent of progressive liberals who centered around The World, Harper's, and the Atlantic in firm opposition against Italian fascism. While some American intellectuals at that time lauded Mussolini's shrewd statesmanship and enlightened pragmatic methods as the answer to a defunct American progressivism, Lippmann was never so deluded. His editorials in The World repeatedly criticized Mussolini's dictatorial corporate state for tottering precariously on an unstable popular will. In a 1929 letter to his friend Bernard Berenson, Lippmann explained why he thought fascism was a failed political system: "Centralization, as such, even with the Rights of Man in operation at the capital, is, I think, incompatible with effective self-government. The failure to see this makes me wonder if Italian liberals really understood self-government." 49

Like Niebuhr in the early 1930's, Lippmann believed that economics illuminated the evil of fascism. In A Preface to Morals, he argued that both fascism and bolshevism were products of "pre-industrial" societies clinging to archaic feudal and absolutist patterns. Highlighting the anachronisms in Russia and Italy, Lippmann argued that both bolshevism and fascism aimed to "cure the evils of a somewhat primitive form of capitalism." Modern industrial societies, such as Germany, Austria, and Japan, were immune from such primitivism. 50

The rise of Nazism in the early 1930's led Lippmann to modify his position. In 1933, he began work on The Good Society, a book which characterized fascism

as a form of collectivism sprung from the disorders of nineteenth century liberalism. His writings about the moral deficiencies of Nazism extended from his opposition in the 1920's to the Machiavellian politics of Italian fascism. The Nazi rise to power, he argued in 1933, had been facilitated by "impotent and demoralized" parliamentarians who thought with "one mind and one heart." Such conformity, combined with the Nazi obsession with violence, was the product of barbarism and contrary to the course of history -- the progression from a primitive to a civil society -- and to all human experience.  

Though the Nazi military threat to international peace appeared momentarily contained, Lippmann was wary about Germany's future. He recognized that individual pretensions to unlimited power endangered any future peace in Europe:

The danger that hangs over Europe lies in the fact that the most energetic of the Nazi leaders are in a mood of mystic exaltation and feel that they are invincible and infallible...There is a danger, to put it plainly, that under the influence of mob feeling and the fumes of their own rhetoric, they will go mad and attack some one who has power to strike back.  

As realistic as Lippmann was about the Nazi aggression and its plans for territorial expansion, he remained reticent on the Jewish question from 1933 to 1938. Not until the November 1938 Kristallnacht, Goebbel's nation-wide program of terror against the Jews, did Lippmann speak out (albeit briefly) against Nazi anti-Semitism. Being half-Jewish himself, it is hard to see why Lippmann, who demonstrated a genuine concern for social injustice and a keen eye of international affairs, would offer almost no commentary on the Nazi crimes against the Jews.

52Ibid, 328.
Whether his reticence was due to an over reliance on "disinterestedness," as his biographer Ronald Steel suggested, or the product of his "cosmopolitan values," as historian Steven Blum would argue, are both plausible explanations. More importantly, though, Lippmann's failure to address the Jewish question demonstrated the precariousness of his disinterested position as a means of detecting all forms of evil. In the Public Opinion, Lippmann placed his faith in the lucid and disinterested specialist unencumbered by the emotions of the masses. But in doing so, he underestimated the bureaucrat's manipulative potential over the masses.

By contrast, Niebuhr's sensitivity to the Jewish question and his more distrustful view of power credits his profound conception of social justice. It was Niebuhr's commitment to socialism, his mid-Western roots, and his first-hand witness of poverty in Detroit that made him a keen observer to the depths of depravity. Because Niebuhr remained a critic of bourgeois individualism throughout the 1930's, he did not favor Lippmann's elite style of democracy to the progressive ideal of popular rule. Rather, he believed that those who advocated that trained specialists should run public affairs underestimated the pervasive presence of self-interest at all levels of politics. For Niebuhr, the idea that the expert could use power altruistically to enlighten the public conscience simply showed "the prejudice of the intellectual, who is so much the rationalist that he imagines the evils of government can be eliminated by the expert knowledge of specialists." For Niebuhr, the individual, and to a greater degree the group, was always tempted to transcend the limits of nature when in a position of power.

---

Lippmann's silence on the Jewish question also reveals a key difference between his and Niebuhr's understanding of human nature. Although both correctly identified that freedom, the essence of democracy, was also the origin of evil in the individual, Niebuhr more than Lippmann understood the irrationality of human actions. This was because Christianity appreciated an emotional spirit which evaded the humanist's eye. Niebuhr's insights into the necessity of particularism and fanaticism as a driving force in the quest for social justice seemed to elude Lippmann's cosmopolitan, secular sensibility. As much as disinterestedness could protect the intellectual from the fanaticism of mass movements, one needed to understand mass movements as a religion in order to grasp its fervor.

Although Lippmann lacked a full understanding of the emotional aspects of Nazism, the fanatical nature of Nazism did have a significant impact on his thinking; the rise of National Socialism altered his views on the course of Western democracy and marked an intellectual turning point in his career. Throughout the 1920's, Lippmann had argued that the humanization of politics would provide the basis for social justice. Observing the Nazi rise to power in early 1933 and the centralization of the German government during the economic crisis, Lippmann wrote more frequently about the dangers of state economic planning, both at home and abroad. War bent authoritarian systems of government, whose collectivism defined justice by subsuming the individual to state interests, challenged Lippmann's assumptions about the future of democracy -- specifically, that a lasting international peace was possible and that universal moral standards were attainable. As Steven Blum accurately observed, Lippmann's philosophy
"eschewed conflict, expected prosperity and international amity," and thus was "ill suited to soothe a menacing militaristic and impoverished world." 55

Nazism also led Lippmann to rethink the nature of evil and the uses of political power in a democratic society. At the end of the 1920's, he had hoped that social inequality and political corruption would be progressively weaned from society through a universal, humanistic theory of government. By the early 1930's, the idea that evil could be managed by any rational or scientific method seemed not only naive but dangerous. The development of the Nazi state after 1933 alerted Lippmann to the problem of centralized state power. The increasing incidents of Nazi brutality by party bureaucrats and police battalions revealed a burgeoning collectivist regime built on homogenization, atomization, and intolerance -- the very characteristics of mass rule which Lippmann found so repugnant. As one who championed the organic, pluralistic society against the strident moralism of progressive reformers, Lippmann put himself to the task of defending democratic liberalism against the mechanistic evils of the authoritarian state.

In *Method of Freedom* (1934), Lippmann argued that the conditions which led to totalitarianism were imbedded in the popular rule of mass societies. Demagoguery and the dominance of special interests, which Lippmann considered sickly by-products of mass society and popular rule, made Americans susceptible to fascism. As a preventative measure against authoritarianism, Lippmann proposed an enlargement of executive power to cover matters of government finance and an expansion of the middle-class as a means of solidifying the state. Since the public cared more about tangible economic issues and less about political

stability, the proper governmental policy would require a "compensated economy" -- one that maintained "a working, moving equilibrium in the complex of private transactions." Such a policy would help quell the "progressive popularization of American government." 56

In 1933, responding to the authoritarian expressions in Germany, Lippmann began work on a book which attacked the theoretical basis of totalitarianism and offered a defense for liberal democracy. The Good Society built on the ideas of Austrian economists Friedrich A. Hayek and Ludwig von Mises. Hayek and Mises, who rose to popularity among Western audiences in the late 1930's and early 1940's, drew on the tradition of nineteenth century classical liberalism to argue that collectivist economics suppressed individual liberty. The psychological effects of this suppression on the individual, they thought, mirrored those of totalitarian regimes. For this reason, an economy based on private property and free market capitalism was essential to the preservation of individual freedom.

By accepting the premise of Hayek's and Mises' argument, Lippmann took a decidedly conservative turn from the progressivism of his early career. This did not mean, however, that Lippmann had abandoned his liberal orientation. Despite the central role the Austrian economists played in The Good Society, Lippmann held too much confidence in the welfare state and in the efficacy of government-directed civic affairs to become a proponent of laissez faire economic theory. Moreover, Lippmann retained the basic liberal belief that human nature could be

molded toward progressively better ends -- a concept anathema to conservative thought.

Lippmann interest in Hayek's and Mises' ideas did not alter his politics. Applying their theory to the political arena, Lippmann in *The Good Society* he made the inviolability of the individual the hallmark of a just political system. He argued that the modern social economy depended on ideas and institutions which respected the sanctity of the individual --diversity, the division of labor, the rule of law. By this measure, the collectivist system would fail because "it rests on a radically false conception of the economy, of law, and of human nature." 57

Lippmann identified two evils inflicting modern politics in the 1930's: the unrestrained desires of the individual in a position of political power, and the various forms of collective state action, both gradual collectivism (or democratic socialism) and totalitarian collectivism. His answer to these problems was to make the inviolability of the individual paramount. Liberal democracy was built upon this idea and the political and economic institutions of Western democracy were the best defense against tyranny.

For Lippmann, the impulse toward evil that fueled the fascist and communist collectives was present in every human being. "The descent from fantasy to fanaticism is easy," he argued. 58 Yet citizens of civilized democracies would resist a final capitulation to collectivism because "real and civilized people have no ambition for, or expectation of, the power to reshape a whole society, and get no help from these architectural designs." Liberal democracy, like totalitarian systems, was susceptible to demagoguery and thus contained the seeds of its own

58Ibid, 356.
destruction. Yet liberal democracy bettered the totalitarian system by progressing to a level of civility. This, in turn, ensured its people would maintain a certain level of self-restraint and self-reflection.

Lippmann doubted whether Americans would successfully defeat the rise of future authoritarian movements. The American revolutionaries, he argued, knew how "to orient their spirits" to combating tyranny. Did they possess an insight that modern Americans had lost? Facing the new tyranny of the modern era, Lippmann questioned whether we lose "vital contact with self-evident truths which have the capacity to infuse the longing to be civilized with universal and inexhaustible energy." 59 For Lippmann, merely to recognize the wickedness of the fascist suppression of the individual was not enough to understand the nature of authoritarianism. Grasping the full danger of Nazism and its antithetical relationship to liberal democracy required a knowledge of the historic achievements of liberalism, the insight that liberty was supported by the division of labor and the common law. Lippmann held these concepts as "the guiding principle of the struggle against the arbitrariness of men and their masters." 60

A central assumption in The Good Society, and not an uncommon one for the time, held that the New Deal's state directed reform measures and seemingly arbitrary delegation of authority verged on authoritarian rule. If collectivism caused totalitarianism in Europe, and President Roosevelt's New Deal demonstrated the same collectivist tendencies, it was reasoned that the United States was headed for dictatorship. Where Lippmann had supported Roosevelt's attempts at reform from 1933 to 1935, mainly because they were immediate needs

59Ibid, 372.
60Ibid, 374.
and temporary, by 1935 he began to perceive the arbitrariness of some New Deal measures. He condemned the National Recovery Association, which the U.S. Supreme Court decreed unconstitutional in 1935, for its unconscious use of excessive moral force: it used boycotts to force industries into compliance with its regulations and it added industries which had not been originally targeted. Roosevelt's 1937 court packing plan, which, Lippmann claimed, strong-armed Congress and the people through enlarged executive power, seemed to parallel arbitrary totalitarian practices that led to violence.\textsuperscript{61}

That Lippmann exaggerated the authoritarian potential of the Roosevelt administration did not contradict his universalist position. Lippmann refused to place moral blame in any one group by resisting to read evil intentions into Roosevelt's actions and by supporting the will of the majority. In this respect, he showed the balance that characterized his approach to politics.

Lippmann's approach to social justice in \textit{The Good Society} marked a change from his socialist days. His universalist view of evil during the 1930's, which replaced his socialist disgust for institutional evil, illustrates philosopher Isaiah Berlin's distinction between two dominant liberal strands: one a positive strand that emphasized human will and action, the other a negative strand that valued the absence of external restraints. As a Socialist, noted historian Barry Riccio, "[Lippmann] had heaped scorn upon lawyers and judges as fossilized remnants of a formalistic past. Lippmann had perceived their devotion to procedure as obstructing a politics built around human needs rather than impersonal institutions. Now the institutions mattered as much as the needs, while

self-restraint rather than self-expression distinguished the ideal citizen of the good society." 62 By making self-restraint the sine qua non of democratic liberalism in its battle with fascism, Lippmann expressed a humanist version of original sin.

Where Niebuhr diverged from Lippmann, however, was the faith he placed in the democratic system as a bulwark against the threat of authoritarianism. While Lippmann's "compensated economy" retained some confidence in the democratic process, Niebuhr, still somewhat attracted throughout the 1930's to Marxist theory and the principle of socialism, predicted the eventual doom of the capitalist system. Niebuhr thought national and international planning had failed to correct the flaws of economic and political life in the West. Reform measures via the planned economy, the elimination of unemployment through improved living standards, and the abolishment of war by lifting restrictions on international trade would ultimately fail because "capitalists in a capitalist system always seek first to consolidate their power." Oblivious to the futility of reforming a decaying system, liberal optimists failed to understand the tragic facts of human nature -- that despite an individual's good intentions, "the impulses of life are able to defy the canons of reason and the dictates of conscience." 63

Both Lippmann and Niebuhr, however, could agree that only a universalist view of evil could explain totalitarianism. Just as Lippmann found the impetus for evil in both fascism and Communism, refusing to simply demonize the Nazis, so too did Niebuhr stress the chaotic nature of collectives as a universal problem. Even more wicked than the unruliness of the collective itself was the non-recognition of that evil. Niebuhr illuminated this point by exposing the errors of

democratic liberalism in his opening chapter of Reflections on the End of an Era: "Every age and every dominant class has its own hypocrisies by which it justifies its impulses. But the illusions and deceptions of a liberal culture have been particularly flagrant because it has been so completely oblivious to the anarchic, the demonic and the primeval in man's collective behavior. Therefore an age of liberalism, rationalism and optimism is ushered to its close by a World War which can be distinguished from previous conflicts, chiefly by the effectiveness of its lethal instruments, the universality of its destruction and the superior plausibility of its various moral justifications." 64

The Totalitarian Image after 1938

In the years between 1938 and 1941, the term "totalitarianism" became more acceptable to a wider spectrum of intellectuals. Not only did more left-of-center liberals come to see the common repressive dictatorial features of the two regimes. Now anti-Stalinist Marxists began to incorporate the idea of "red fascism" into their writings. Historian Judy Kutulas argued that the broadening use of the totalitarian image yielded two inter-related outcomes, both which ultimately produced an ideology that precluded greater possibilities for social and political action. First, the acceptance of totalitarianism mainstreamed liberal anti-Communism, moving it from the fringes of liberalism to its center. By 1938 and 1939, being a responsible intellectual no longer meant finding a radical solution to the economic crisis. Rather, it meant protecting democratic values and institutions

64Ibid, 16-17.
against totalitarian aggression. Second, once the anti-Stalinists accepted the premises of totalitarianism, they gave up on their Marxism, thereby blurring the distinction between Stalinism and Marxism and stunting the momentum of the left.

In another sense, however, the emerging liberal consensus on American democratic values created a sharper awareness of power, a broader understanding of America's role in the world, and a standard by which one could deny the legitimacy of tyranny. Without that moral commitment, economic and democratic reform in the United States may have become a moot point.

However responsibly or irresponsibly intellectuals on the left responded to Communism, it was the immediacies of events abroad that severely limited the appeal for Marxism. When Hitler and Stalin signed the Non-Aggression Pact in August, 1939, the Popular Front experiment of the 1930's came to a crashing halt. Created in 1935 as a defense against fascism, the Popular Front united liberals, socialists, and Communists. Though they varied significantly in their views of Russia and the viability of radical solutions within a liberal democracy, the Popular Fronters found common cause in supporting President Roosevelt, opposing Hitler, and withholding judgment on the evils of Stalinism.

In addition to the goal of opposing Nazism, the most constructive objective of the Popular Front was ostensibly to uphold democratic goals and values and develop a more realistic perspective of world politics through international cooperation. The basis for the Front's unity was an established dichotomy between

---

democracy and reaction. Such a dichotomy, as historian Frank Warren argued, ultimately prevented any realistic perspective of international relations from developing. 66

This dichotomy actually led to an external view of evil among Popular Fronters, the type which Andrew Delbanco thought characterized American cultural relations at the turn of the century. There were those within the Front, such as George Soule (and Niebuhr), who identified the inner-outer distinction of evil within Popular Front politics. One problem with creating a Front against Hitler, thought Soule, was that "it is always far easier to use one's energy in hating a foreign devil than in adjusting [to] complex international realities. And the bitterness of disputes within our national boundaries became subdued as the factions were drawn together by a common fear and a common enmity...The in-group had an out-group whom it could prepare to punish for its own frustrations and deprivations." 67 Thus, for many Popular Fronters who made Russia morally superior to Germany in its economic strategies and militaristic goals, evil became something foreign to Soviet progressivism, be it capitalism or German fascism.

After the Nazi-Soviet Pact, much of this outlook changed. Now faced with an impending world war and the knowledge of Stalin's atrocities, an increasing number of American liberal intellectuals abandoned their radicalism and supported the democratic cause. In May 1939, the Committee for Cultural Freedom, headed by John Dewey, Charles Beard, and Sydney Hook, published a statement in The Nation declaring its opposition to all forms of totalitarianism on the right and the left. In 1940, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), considered a haven for

66Ibid, 207.
Popular Fronters, quickly changed its political stripes by electing the non-Communist George Counts to its chairmanship. AFT Local 5 in New York City passed a resolutions opposing all undemocratic governments, "whether they be Nazist, Communist, Socialist, or Fascist." 68

News of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact heightened American intellectuals' fears of Communism. While they continued to oppose all forms of totalitarianism, both Lippmann and Niebuhr now regarded Communism a greater evil than fascism. Stalin's agreement with Hitler outraged Lippmann. In November, he called the Soviet Union’s threat to seize bases in Finland as "one of the most dreadful catastrophes which has menaced Western civilization since the armed might of Islam invaded Europe." For Lippmann, the prospect of Finland's confrontation with Stalin would mean "resisting the advance of another Genghis Khan." 69

Niebuhr, who was in Britain introducing his magnum opus The Nature and Destiny of Man to audiences at the Gifford lectures, was shocked by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. As a Popular Fronter, he had tolerated Stalin's evils and Communism in principle, but had always been wary of the utopian aspects of Communism. Now he described Communism much more critically, criticizing the overbalance in its devotion to the absolute. "The degradation of communism," he wrote in September 1939, "does not glorify the nation but hopes to establish a universal culture with all particularism eliminated." 70

---

68Kutulas, ""Totalitarianism' Transformed," pp. 81, 85.
69Walter Lippmann, Today and Tomorrow (December 12, 1939).
While the Nazi-Soviet Pact confirmed Lippmann's and Niebuhr's apprehensions about Communist aggression, it did not, however, seem to change the tendency of some liberals to rationalize Soviet militarism. Fellow travelers Corliss Lamont and Anna Louise Strong (who would later develop a close relationship with Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communists) praised the Red Army for invading eastern Poland and preserving peace. The editors of Soviet Russia Today hailed Stalin's agreement with Hitler as an enlightened effort at peace. Even some left-of-center liberals, such as the editors of The New Republic, refused to re-examine their old Popular Front assumptions about the Soviet Union.

This essentially amounted to the externalization of evil and the moral irresponsibility which Lippmann and Niebuhr had warned against. By continuing to argue that totalitarianism was compatible with democracy, observed Frank Warren, liberal intellectuals "tended to perpetuate myths that later prevented the realism and skepticism necessary for a close scrutiny of Russia's professional aims. If the trials remained monstrous frame-ups and Spain remained a simple issue of democracy versus Fascism, then there seemed little wrong in regarding Russia as one of the democratic allies in war and peace." 71 In helping to build the totalitarian theory and a universalist view of evil, Lippmann and Niebuhr distanced themselves from such Popular Front notions.

As the Nazi panzers rolled through Europe and Russia conspired with Germany, an increasing number of anti-Stalinists abandoned their Marxism for liberal anti-Communism. For these intellectuals, the threat of Hitler, the Popular Front tensions, and the Moscow trials discredited radicalism as a vehicle for social

---

justice. By 1940, Marxist social innovation and moral relativism had fallen out of favor with left intellectuals, replaced by a greater appreciation for religion, the tragedy of history, and the conflict between human actions and intentions.

Liberals began to define authoritarian regimes less in terms of economics, as they had in the past, and more in terms of politics and morals. Intellectuals who sought a responsible brand of liberalism were attuned to how the dark side of human nature constricted democracy, as the privilege of individual choice became a critical issue in light of totalitarian repression. Perhaps no group was made more conscious of the sacredness of individual freedom and self-expression than the European émigré intellectuals who survived the horrors of Nazism -- people such as Hannah Arendt and Emil Brunner. Both Arendt and Brunner had first hand experience of Nazi brutality. For them, claiming guaranteed civil rights and a voice in state rule were basic and urgent necessities for a Western society plunged into existential chaos and moral relativism. To possess basic democratic rights could better prepare one to answer the age old question "who am I?" -- an existential tool essential to human survival that totalitarianism had simply erased.

In delineating the evils of totalitarianism, Lippmann and Niebuhr developed similar ideas to the European émigrés; specifically, that the seeds of totalitarianism were implanted in the West and that the tyranny of majoritarian power endangered the state of democracy. In fact, the ideas they brought to the theory of totalitarianism anticipated Hannah Arendt's Origins of Totalitarianism.
Chapter Two

For American intellectuals of the liberal left, the war years were the beginning of consolidation and consensus building that characterized the Cold War era. Responding to the threat of totalitarianism at home and abroad, radical, liberal, and progressive intellectuals, once tenuously united within the politically turbulent Popular Front during the late 1930's, shed their radicalism or radical sympathies and embraced the common values of a liberal democratic society. Faced with limited political alternatives on the left, they put aside their wariness of President Roosevelt's haphazard experimental methods by the end of the war and supported his efforts at social democratic planning.

Some historians see this turn toward consensus underpinned by an acceptance of absolute values and tending toward a Manichean conception of good and evil. They argue that the liberal intellectuals' celebration of consensus marked the death of the liberal progressive sensibility and the end of real possibilities for social renewal. For historian James T. Kloppenberg, the pragmatic foundation of progressive liberalism, once a vibrant source of hope for justice and equality, was eclipsed by the emergence of individualistic rights championed in the pluralism of mid-century liberalism. These historians point to the absolute doctrines of neo-orthodox Christian realism and natural law theory that rose to popularity in the post-war era, championed by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and journalist Walter Lippmann respectively. 72

Lippmann and Niebuhr are often lumped together as critics of the prevailing liberal optimism of the era -- the kind of optimism which has been caricatured in the ideas of philosopher John Dewey. Both Lippmann and Niebuhr launched penetrating criticisms of Dewey's naturalism, his commitment to communitarian or popular democracy, and his faith in pragmatic rationalism as a vehicle for eliminating social injustice.

While Lippmann and Niebuhr engaged themselves in a reconstruction of the moral basis of American liberalism, at the heart of their effort was a search for the origins of evil. They argued that the prevailing liberal optimism that underpinned the Social Gospel movement and prevailing theories in social science and education had obscured the true source of evil in the modern world. For these groups, sin no longer resided within the human soul, as it had for the Puritans. It became an eradicable quality through progressively greater technological and social development.

As much as Lippmann and Niebuhr were realists who sought to correct the errors of progressive liberalism, their realist critique retained a pragmatic sensibility apparent in their search for the origins of evil. In exposing the limitations of what they perceived to be the utopian illusions of modern liberalism, in delineating the moral weaknesses of majoritarian democracy, they offered a new system for detecting evil that combined a pragmatic use of history with a realist awareness of the pervasiveness of power and the human temptation toward sin. Their efforts to locate a consensus of values that could give full expression and definition for the ideals of justice, liberty, and equality was not only noble but timely. It awoke Americans to the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality in a democratic society, to the depths of evil buried within the liberal consciousness.
The argument that consensus building among liberal intellectuals failed to broaden the possibilities for social justice has some merit. Because the move toward comity in the post-war era often resulted in a blurring of moral distinctions, many intellectuals within the post-war liberal community discovered no better methods for detecting moral evil than they had in the 1930's. Americans could celebrate postwar prosperity and the virtues of democracy that the Allied victory seemed to vindicate. Yet they struggled to find a moral explanation for the disappearance of six million Jews in Europe. Nor did they adequately address the unspeakable moral atrocities that befell the Japanese after the United States dropped the atomic bomb – horrors which the general public understood as merely a series of distant detonations that yielded a swift Japanese surrender.

In many ways, the search for a universalistic system by which to measure the morality of human actions often led to moral uncertainty. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 did much to destroy the old methods of recognition -- a belief in reason and progress as tools for social betterment, a use for scientific method in eliminating economic inequality thought to be of structural origin, a faith in the Soviet Union as a pragmatic democratic experiment in progressive social welfare. For scholars within the academic disciplines of history, political science, and anthropology, the threat of totalitarianism invalidated the principles of cognitive and moral relativism once trusted during the depression. With the pending crisis of world war, those liberals who became estranged from their radicalism in the 1930's began to believe during the war that distinctions between good and evil required some acceptance of the existence of absolute or unifying values; many liberal intellectuals insisted that the "pro-fascist" principles of skepticism, pragmatism, and relativism had obliterated a clear sense of moral distinctions and thus left
Americans weak to confront fascism. 73 Yet in embracing these absolute values, in making democracy the only critical standard attainable, left-liberals exposed themselves to the same dogmatism of the totalitarianism they attacked. 74

The distinction between good and bad human actions was further complicated by the perception that America was beginning to mirror the features which gave rise to authoritarian regimes -- the same rootless, atomized, and anxiety-ridden conditions that had allowed Hitler to exploit the fears of the German people. Intellectual and cultural expression, characterized in the 1930's by optimism and the spirit of social progress, gave way to fears of economic stagnation and spiritual depression in the 1940's. Americans increasingly defined themselves in individualistic rather than collectivist terms. Historian James T. Kloppenberg maintains that the emergence of this individualistic identity led President Roosevelt to cloak his solicitations for social welfare programs not within the bygone language of the progressive era -- that of social justice and equality -- but in terms of individual rights. 75 Frank Warren argues that those left-liberal intellectuals who hoped for a world democratic revolution after the war realized their dreams were merely "noble abstractions" when the Roosevelt administration refused to conduct the war by such ideological means. 76

While the idea of an emerging consensus of values during the war era is somewhat of a generalization, it does express a truth about how American intellectuals at this time preferred to view the American heritage. For many liberal

---

74 See Charles Alexander, "Leftist Critics of the American Left, 1938-1942."
75 James T. Kloppenberg, The Virtues of Liberalism, pp. 140-141.
intellectuals, social, political, and economic growth in America was best characterized not as a historic battle between the people and the interests, but rather as the advanced product of western civilization – a political system that contained and was preserved by a commonality of liberal values in which ideological politics had never served a real purpose. As historian Marian Morton observed, the liberal aversion to ideological politics revealed the contradiction of an ideology that was anti-ideological. The tension that resulted, between a striving for disinterestedness and a longing of ideological purpose and foundation, was one of the most conspicuous contradictions among the liberal intellectual community during the war.77

Faced with such uncertainty, left-liberal intellectuals confronted two challenges in gauging the depths of evil during the war. First, as historian Frank Warren demonstrated, a steady sympathy toward the Soviet Union continued after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and throughout the war. Fellow travelers and Russian sympathizers in the United States continued to view the Soviet Union as an enlightened democracy and offered no penetrating critique of Western liberalism. Moreover, their apology for Stalin's expansionist intentions and political liquidations threatened to obscure some of Russia's truly evil inner workings. It was the counterweight to Henry Wallace's Progressive Party in 1948, the non-Communist left that led the debate over America's participation in the war, that helped to change the way intellectuals thought about the nature of evil.

Historian Andrew Delbanco framed this debate between progressive and non-Communist liberals in cultural terms, between iconoclastic ironists -- those

---

77Marian J. Morton, The Terrors of Ideological Politics (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1972), passim.
who debunked genteel moralism and original sin as the structural support for racism, xenophobia, and religious superstition -- and those who recognized that the absence of this moral structure required a revival of the concept of sin, an emphasis on redemption which would reassert the Fall as a symbolic power, a unifying force, and a moral standard by which to recognize the human capacity for radical evil. 78

Within a political context, Delbanco's paradigm helps to explain how the debate over intervention redirected the ways in which intellectuals thought about the nature of evil -- how the confrontation between isolationists and interventionists reflected America's struggle to achieve moral recognition of its own insouciance to the problem of radical evil. Delbanco's argument helps to frame the issue as the liberal intellectuals' challenge to the individualist perception of power within the ranks of pacifism. It also begs an examination into the tensions and contradictions raised by the debate among liberal intellectuals during the 1938-1942 period. Could America maintain its virtue, its critical perspective, or any certain moral framework by accepting the terms of total war? If America assumed a protector role against reactionary regimes throughout the world, would it have the capacity to recognize the limits of its own power? These dilemmas indicated that the decision to intervene was never a foregone conclusion for most liberal critics of isolationism. They also suggested that without more careful self-scrutiny of the limits of a growing U.S. power and prestige, the country would be vulnerable to perpetrating greater acts of unconscious cruelty as it further extended its hand throughout the world.

---

78 Andrew Delbanco, The Death of Satan pp. 185-191.
A second challenge facing liberal intellectuals concerned the role of the intellectual during the war. In accepting the values of a liberal democratic society, liberals found themselves in the tenuous position of making moral distinctions while operating within a morally ambiguous political system. Given that human beings now faced a world that could be run through mass manipulation and bureaucratic terror, to what degree had the conditions for the exercise of moral responsibility deteriorated in modern societies? This problem was beyond the reach of Marxist millennial thought, which had failed to predict the staying power of National Socialism and had always assumed that state power would be employed virtuously in the hands of the virtuous.

Among those American and European intellectuals who searched for moral culpability during the war, and later in the tragedy of the Holocaust, some tended to blame the German people themselves, thereby overlooking the crisis as an expression of the will-to-power in human nature. Other interpreters followed German philosopher Hannah Arendt in strictly adhering to a universalistic, cosmopolitan standard, thus failing to understand the tragedy from a Jewish or German perspective. For the playwright Archibald MacLeish, such a commitment to objective detachment among intellectuals at the outset of the war had rendered America susceptible to totalitarianism. Writers and scholars who purged themselves of their "subjective passions, the emotional preconceptions which color conviction and judgment," thought MacLeish, "prepared the mind for disaster." 79

In this respect, the recognition of shades of evil during the war required a transcendental moral system which balanced the collective and individual will -- a

system which exalted a universal law while allowing some degree of individual choice and tribalist passions within a scheme of social justice.

This chapter examines the success of two liberal intellectual critics of liberalism in reorienting American liberalism to the changing nature of evil during the war. As the two most influential critics of isolationism, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr and journalist Walter Lippmann stood firm against the tyranny of international and domestic fascism. Both attacked the prevalent liberal pragmatism of the era and an easy faith in social progress through scientific method, arguing that the evil could not be combated by relying on goodwill or reason alone. Both helped to build America's confrontation with its consciousness, what historian William Graebner termed the "postwar turn inward toward aspects of the self." By stressing the centrality of sin in human existence and the tragedy of history, Niebuhr and Lippmann called for a reexamination of human nature at a time when the radical evil of Nazism seemed to transcend the parameters of public comprehension.

Isolationism: "A Catastrophe of the Soul"

Historian Selig Adler characterized the twenty-seven months between the outbreak of World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor "a prolonged and bitter encounter between isolationists and their opponents." The volatility of that debate, which was ultimately resolved by attack on Pearl Harbor, centered on two conflicting views of the origins of evil in human nature and how the West should

---

organize against reactionary regimes. Those who urged the country to avoid another disastrous war at all costs, proclaiming fascism a European problem rather than an American problem, tended to express a Manichean view in their foreign policy; they argued it was the United States' destiny to protect the unfettered virtues of its own democracy against a demonic Nazi regime by abstaining from the conflict.

The "interventionists" -- a label which encompassed arguments from war preparedness, to financial and military aid for the Allies, to all-out entry into the war -- argued that America's future was inextricably tied to that of Britain's; to allow a Nazi conquest of the British navy would irrevocably alter the balance of power in favor of the Axis. The interventionists perceived isolationism a facilitator for fascism at home and abroad, and a more insidious threat than Nazi barbarism. Faced with the prospect of Hitler gaining a foothold in South America, which could lead to a breach in the United States' economic and geo-political security, interventionists argued that Nazi tyranny posed a greater evil to the country than war itself.

By the end of the war, the bulwark of the isolationist ranks -- including Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg who represented the Republican isolationist bloc, and the majority of the American public -- had renounced their doctrine of neutrality and their opposition to the idea of the United States' assuming a world protector role. Ultimately, the imperative to stop fascist aggression abroad brought about this transformation. Yet it was Reinhold Niebuhr and Walter Lippmann who were among the first to argue for intervention, and in so doing they helped to create the moral vocabulary of the Cold War. Demanding that the United States develop a degree of self-awareness in foreign affairs by balancing its
claims to power with its resources formed a central tenet of the burgeoning realist
movement. It was Niebuhr and Lippmann who stressed the inevitability of
international conflict, the centrality of national self-interest in political affairs, and
the idea that power politics rather than international goodwill dictated the course
of international relations.

Their argument against isolationism drew its force from the philosophical
view of evil as a privation, a spiritual deficiency within human nature. Their
metaphysical exploration into the impetus for fascism challenged some more
popular liberal interpretations, specifically the belief that the source of evil in
Nazism could be found in history. A majority within the liberal community,
whether they adhered to a "pragmatic rationalism" premised on the efficacy of
experimental reason and the scientifically manageable society, or a "traditional
liberalism" based on a humanist respect for the organic and communal currents of
Western civilization, pointed to the structural flaws that had led to fascism. In so
doing, they attributed the evil of fascism to man's finite nature -- either his inability
to engineer structural changes within the democratic system which would have
prevented fascism, or the atomized individual made fodder for Nazism by his
estrangement from a pre-industrial liberal conception of the wholeness in man.
Both views built on French Enlightenment thought, which attributed evil to flaws
in political or economic organization or to social anachronisms. 82

Contesting these views, Niebuhr and Lippmann developed parallel
arguments premised on the idea that the evil of Nazism arose from a spiritual
corruption in the human soul. For Niebuhr, the temptation of the self "to make

Putnam's Sons, 1971); John Patrick Diggins, Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America,
himself the center and source of his own life," his proclivity to imagine himself God, resulted from a deficiency rooted in his own freedom. It originated in the anxiety he felt over his own dependence and weakness and from his position in and above nature: because man was both a creature of nature and transcended nature as a free spirit, he acted out of fear in willfully turning away from the creator. As Biblical Christianity understood, man's creaturely limitations were not evil in themselves, since God designed human beings to accept their finitude as part of the whole. Drawing on the insights of Augustine and Kierkegaard, Niebuhr observed:

The fragmentary character of human life is not regarded as evil in biblical faith because it is seen from the perspective of a centre of life and meaning in which each fragment is related to the plan of the whole, to the will of God. The evil arises when the fragment seeks by its own wisdom to comprehend the whole or attempts by its own power to realize it. 83

While the pragmatic liberal position held that evil was eradicable because reason was virtuous and sin a mutable quality in history, Niebuhr argued against the premises of naturalism. He maintained that evil was an act of the will, that "sin has its source not in temporality but in man's willful refusal to acknowledge the finite and determinate character of his existence." 84

For Lippmann, Nazism was no longer a product of collectivist planning, as he had argued in The Good Society. By the early 1940's, Lippmann began to write about fascism as a sickness of modern liberalism. He warned of a spiritual deficiency growing in Western society, a pronouncement which drew similar

84 Ibid, 177.
conclusions to the humanism of the traditional liberal position; the Western
democracies’ abandonment of the virtues of the Western tradition, he argued,
virtues weakened by the easy optimism of modern liberalism, had opened the
floodgates for Nazi barbarism. Without a morally responsible government to unify
the country, argued Lippmann, the masses would fall back on authoritarian rule.

Both Niebuhr and Lippmann argued the case for intervention with the
conviction that the human temptation toward evil necessitated an inevitable power
struggle between nations. What saved them from the nihilism and moral relativism
that this position entailed was their respective transcendental standards. As realists
who recognized the deficiencies of man within a transcendental context, Niebuhr
and Lippmann distinguished between the common sins of humanity and the sins of
tyranny which only force could mitigate.

The complexities of the international crisis demanded an awareness of such
ethical distinctions in foreign policy. For Lippmann and Niebuhr, the optimism of
modern liberalism which undergirded the United States’ diplomacy during the
inter-war period was incapable of such distinctions. It is not possible within the
space of this thesis to summarize the variety of liberal responses to totalitarianism.
Liberal intellectual perceptions of the Soviet Union alone constituted a mix of
idealist and realist positions, as historian Frank Warren has demonstrated. 85 One
can conclude, however, that the ground swell for isolationism during the inter-war
period was underpinned by what historian Andrew Delbanco generally
characterized as a culture of blame, a tendency toward scapegoating which placed
the origin of evil in the other. 86

85 Frank Warren, Noble Abstractions, pp. 172-203.
86 Delbanco, The Death of Satan, pp. 155-183.
Placing moral culpability in the enemy was naturally conducive to the iconoclasm of the inter-war period, especially the polemical responses of Marxist intellectuals. Those intellectuals on the radical left, reeling after the demise of the Popular Front and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939, struggled to find a meaning in the war. These Marxists intellectuals tended to attribute moral culpability for the war outside the self. George Seldes of In Fact typified the Communist position. Every opponent of the revolution became evil in itself -- William Allan White's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, racial bigots, resisting labor unions, and President Roosevelt for scheming the country into a war. The Daily Worker announced its position, shortly after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, that the capitalist class was solely responsible for an "imperialist war." This viewpoint prevailed within the ranks of American Communists until June 22, 1941, when Germany invaded Russia and the Communists quickly switched back to an interventionist position.

The revisionist literature into the causes and consequences of World War I appearing during the inter-war period also contributed to the culture of paranoia and scapegoating of the 1920's and 1930's. The New York Herald Tribune journalist Walter Millis's Road to War: America, 1914-1917, published in 1935, was a best seller. Millis blamed America's entry into the war on the Wilson administration's inconsistent neutralist policy, on British and French propaganda which vilified Germany as a moral threat to American democracy, and the American business classes which benefited from the governments' arms and munitions sales. Millis's last point built on a series of inquiries from the previous year which formed the "merchants of death" thesis. Author Helmuth C. Englebrecht's piece by the same name, George Seldes's Iron, Blood, and Profits,
among several other works formed the contentious argument that a conspiracy of bankers and munitions makers had engineered the U.S. entry into the war for private profit. 87 These studies helped to convince a large segment of the public that America's participation in the war had been a mistake, and that measures should be taken to prevent another war, such as arms embargoes, banning loans, and limiting trade with belligerents.

The support for isolationism was also strong among liberal intellectuals. Left-of-center liberals who argued that America was unaffected by ideological politics, such as William Henry Chamberlain, supported pluralism, interest group politics, and the virtue of political moderation. They argued that by strengthening democracy at home, Germany would be reluctant to try and win over Americans to National Socialism. Historian Charles Beard's prescription for U.S. -- to develop continental resources and a wide distribution of domestic wealth in order to quell the impulse toward engagement in foreign wars -- reflected the strong belief among a majority of liberals that the war should be a European concern. As historian Selig Alder observed, "as long as Hitler was caged behind the Maginot Line, the Beardian approach dominated the liberal mind." 88 Hitler's advances in the spring of 1940, in addition to the liberal progressive journals moving toward intervention, led to increased support for the United States' participation in the war.

Some liberals supported neutrality, but harbored political and philosophical views which put them squarely in the interventionist camp. Writers such as Lionel Trilling, V.F. Calverton, Niebuhr, and theologian Paul Tillich, focused on the sinful

88Adler, The Isolationist Impulse, p. 271.
human condition, the tragedy of the international situation and the reasons for America's non-involvement in it. These intellectuals were more aware of the oppression of collectivist regimes, its bureaucratic rigidity and terror, its destruction of the individual conscience. They argued that reform and interest group politics were too naive and too romantic to address the complexities of modern politics and the tragedies in human history.

Niebuhr was at the forefront of this group. His early support for U.S. aid to Britain distinguished him as a sharp critic of isolationism. The virtues of American democracy alone, he argued, were ineffective as a mere moral deterrent to fascist tyranny. The Nazis posed a dangerous political and economic threat to the United States and were likely to succeed, precisely because the isolationists failed to recognize that the Nazis could only be defeated on their own terms -- through methods of coercion rather than moral suasion. In predicting a contest of powers, however, Niebuhr was careful to steer a course between the limits of isolationism, the prevalence of anti-Semitism within the pro-interventionist business class, and what the Roosevelt administration considered acceptable policy during the war. As a matter of practicality, this meant taking small steps toward a U.S. alliance with Britain in conjunction with the public's strong preference to stay out of war, supporting pro-Zionist organizations in their efforts to promote a Jewish homeland in Palestine rather than directly challenging the administration's refugee policy, and backing the government's curtailment of civil liberties during the war rather than opposing its policy of Japanese internment.

Several historians have faulted Niebuhr for his acquiescence to the moral atrocities committed under the authority of Roosevelt's administration. These criticisms are justified to the extent that Niebuhr was one of many with the liberal
community more willing to preserve his ties with the administration than to take active measures toward his social democratic goals. Robert Moats Miller correctly observed that those liberals who threw their support behind Roosevelt’s war policies, however tortured they were by their decision, were nevertheless unwilling or unable to judge themselves by the same standards they applied to the Axis powers: "The Niebuhrians," maintained Miller, "extolled stout-hearted resistance to tyranny, but neglected to spell out this noble phrase in terms of the hundreds of thousands of German, Italian, and Japanese old men, pregnant women, youths and infants who we blinded, scalded, boiled, flayed, buried alive, disemboweled, eviscerated." 89

As much as this criticism uncovers the contradiction of a liberal ideology premised on a stand against ideology and utopianism, it does not obscure the fact that Niebuhr at this time made the most penetrating critique of modern liberalism within the liberal community. This is well illustrated by his efforts to expose the liberal oversights to both the various manifestations of evil during the war and the source of evil in modern history. Niebuhr's critique of liberalism's inability to recognize the danger of Nazi tyranny was undergirded by his forceful public policy positions against isolationism -- an unpopular stance among most liberals in the late 1930's. The fascist uprisings in Ethiopia in 1935 and in Spain in 1936, in addition to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August of 1939, convinced Niebuhr that the West's anemic response to Nazism was the worst danger facing the United States. He argued that the tyranny of totalitarianism posed a greater threat to Americans than the possibility of war -- a position which directly targeted

the Christian church's pacifism. In December, 1938, Niebuhr reacted to the Munich conference with moral certainty. The danger of Nazism, he believed, necessitated a precise course of action: the United States must retain its neutrality, but those who thought it God's will "never to call the bluff of a bully for fear that [one] might be involved in violence...had better prepare for the complete victory of the barbarism that is spreading over Europe." 90

Beginning in the fall of 1939, Niebuhr supported Roosevelt's "cash and carry" policy of munitions exports to Britain. He continued to back the administration's war preparedness program by endorsing the President's bases for destroyers deal in the summer of 1940. In May of that year, Niebuhr officially resigned from the Socialist Party. The utopian perfectionism underlying its pacifist opposition to the war, he argued, measured all historical distinctions against ideal perspectives. Niebuhr judged such utopianism incapable of discerning between relative levels of sin. The pacifist position implied that United States foreign policy must be shaped by God's law alone, requiring one to resist the common human temptation toward violence and sinfulness. This position, thought Niebuhr, ignored the fact that some sins must be opposed by force in order that humanity would be free to carry out God's law on earth.

This was the thrust of Niebuhr's first issue of Christianity and Crisis appearing in February, 1941. Designed as a Christian interventionist journal, it broke with the pacifism of C.C. Morrison's Christian Century standing firm against the perfectionism of liberal Protestantism. In valuing love as the supreme law of life over the duty to defend one's nation, the pacifists, argued Niebuhr, "made no

distinction between an individual act of self-abnegation and a political policy of submission to injustice, whereby lives and interests other than our own are defrauded or destroyed. They seek erroneously to build a political platform upon individual perfection." 91

Niebuhr stepped up his attacks against the abstract moralism of pacifism less than a year before the United States entered the war. In January, 1941, Niebuhr testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee arguing that Germany's economic and geo-political objectives threatened the national interest. The crisis in Europe was not a struggle between rival imperialisms, contrary to the pacifism of the Christian Church and the isolationism of the Communist Party. The utopianism of the pacifist position held that Western civilization was riddled with injustices and therefore not worth defending. It overlooked the fact that Nazi barbarism itself was more insidious than all the flaws of a liberal democracy. A greater appreciation within liberalism for a realist's awareness of the persistence of power, thought Niebuhr, would help democratic societies know "that all historic choices are relative. [They] would realize that even an imperfect pluto-democratic world is still civilization and that the alternative which the Nazis propose is really slavery." 92

"History never presents us with choices of pure good and pure evil" stressed Niebuhr. Yet the Nazis represented the closest thing to it. The Nazi advance through Europe, he maintained, promised future catastrophe for the Western democracies. Given the urgency of the crisis, Niebuhr concluded that the

---

pending Lend-Lease bill "offers us a better chance to keep out of war than anything else I know." 93

In delineating the failings of modern democratic theory, Niebuhr found a natural weakness in democratic foreign policy arising from its subordination of imperialism as the nation's raison d'être to the enshrinement of individual liberties. For Niebuhr, the utopian quality imbedded in the democratic commitment to justice predated the twentieth century. Niebuhr found that the obstinate individualistic and utopian currents within the liberal culture, unable to measure the perils they confronted, were more deeply rooted in centuries of misunderstanding concerning the source of evil in history. Niebuhr pointed to the contradictions of eighteenth century naturalism -- both the empirical kind and the more simplistic naturalism of the French enlightenment based on the social harmony of competing will-to-live organisms. He contended that because the naturalists placed the impetus for evil in the other -- within bad priests, evil rulers, and ruling classes -- they could not account for the fact that evil did not originate within nature, although their naturalism assumed it. Nor could they explain why such agents "should have the power and the inclination to introduce evil into history." 94

Niebuhr attributed this error to a theoretical contradiction in naturalistic thought which had resulted in its moral confusion about the nature of man and his relative freedom within nature. The forefathers of modern liberalism -- Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx -- all expressed a deterministic psychology which limited man's freedom within nature. Hobbes and Locke

believed that human beings were circumscribed by the passions of nature, and governable only through man's natural tendency toward communitarianism. For Smith, justice derived automatically from natural laws in the economic sphere and for Marx, social harmony was the inevitable product of the primitive collective conscious in human behavior congruent with the 'laws of motion' of a classless society. All believed that evil had evolved into the world through a structural flaw in nature. Yet the voluntarism of their social theory, be it in the form of the social contract, the abolishment of oppressive government, or the proletarian revolution, assumed that man was free to act in history. It depended on "man's mastery over his social destiny." 95

Niebuhr observed that one of these theories recognized the insight of Biblical Christianity, that "the freedom of man is the source of all his creativity as well as his vices." The Christian doctrine understood that the persistence of man's sin arose from his anxiety over his position within nature and above it; "man actually has a greater degree of freedom in his essential structure and less freedom in history than modern culture realizes." In linking man's reason and passion within an evolutionary process toward a good end, theorists of naturalism failed to judge the gap between "the purely natural impulse of survival and the distinctively human and spiritual impulse of pride and power." 96

Thus, Niebuhr's inquiry into the origins of evil in modern culture shows his distaste for absolutist and deterministic theories of human nature. Demonstrating how history revealed the contradictions of naturalism and idealism, the basis of modern liberalism, Niebuhr demonstrated a pragmatists' distaste for formalism. He

96Ibid, pp. 99-104.
wholeheartedly rejected the "automatic balances of a free competitive system" implied in Hayek's classical liberalism, as did Lippmann. Unlike Lippmann, Niebuhr could not accept natural law as a viable universal standard, since reason contained too much self-interest "to define any standard of justice which is universally valid or acceptable." 97 Niebuhr maintained that human beings in their will-to-power were ultimately under the absolute judgment of God's law, it precisely in adhering to this law that allowed human beings to recognized all the relative moral choices they faced.

By early 1940, Lippmann stood beside Niebuhr as one of America's most outspoken critics of isolationism. Yet Lippmann arrived at this position only after many twists and turns in his own thinking. Throughout the 1920's and 1930's, Lippmann wrote as a Wilsonian idealist, arguing at various stages for disarmament, collective security, "aggressive pacifism," and "a political equivalent of war." All these measures presumed the existence of an efficacious international community capable of containing and eliminating the chaos of total war. As the conditions in Europe and Far East began to deteriorate in the mid-1930's, and collective security failed to prevent war in Ethiopia in 1935, Lippmann shifted to a neutralist position. It became increasingly clear to him that the United States could not protect its own national security without significant aid to Britain. He argued that America should send all-out aid to Britain without drawing itself into the conflict.

As Hitler mobilized his armies for an assault on Eastern Europe, Lippmann observed the unfolding events with a critical eye, but without straying too far from

---

the public mood of isolationism. On September 18th, 1938, Britain and France offered Hitler the German regions of the Sudentenland of Czechoslovakia. While Lippmann did not concur with Neville Chamberlain's strategy of appeasement, he maintained that it was the most sensible policy to follow given the West's lack of resolve and the failed strategies of collective security, economic sanctions, and moral pressure. His position changed on September 29 with the announcement of the Munich accords, which Lippmann pronounced "the equivalent of a major military disaster."98 The Nazi Soviet Pact of August, 1939 appeared to Lippmann to upset the balance of power, so he argued for a repeal of the Neutrality Acts in order to allow for arm sales to Britain and France.

The urgency of events from the spring of 1940 to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor led Lippmann to argue for more active support of Britain. He urged the Roosevelt administration and the public to back all-out aid to the British government in order to stop the formation of a collectivist industrial regime. During this period, observed historian Francine Curro Cary, Lippmann's policy of total defense "evolved into its final form," as "the shape of the war became clearer and as the meaning of a British defeat became more ominous."99 Lippmann argued that the United States should take all measures short of war to ensure dominance of British sea power.

It was during these eighteen months that Lippmann made his sharpest observations about the meaning of Nazi tyranny, what Hitler's plans for territorial expansion meant for the rest of the world, and on America's own responsibility for the evil of totalitarianism. No longer did he argue that Britain and France alone

---

could contain Hitler, thereby allowing the United States to remain neutral. As Nazi ground forces began their blitzkrieg attack in Denmark in early April, then moved through the valley of the Somme in mid-May, American public opinion began to shift away from absolute isolationism.

At this point, Lippmann made his final departure from Wilsonianism to focus on military preparedness and the national interest. No longer did he define the evils of totalitarianism arising from a collectivist, industrial regime. Arguing that totalitarianism resulted from the "sickness of liberal democracy," a theory which later became his central argument in The Public Philosophy, Lippmann continued to attack the deficiencies of democratic theory. Americans had been slow to support Britain's navy against the Nazis, thought Lippmann, because they were "duped by a falsification of history...miseducated by a swarm of innocent but ignorant historians, by reckless demagogues, and by foreign interests, into believing that America entered the other war because of British propaganda, the loans of bankers, the machinations of President Wilson's advisors, and a drummed up patriotic ecstasy."100

On June 18, 1940, four days after the Germans conquered Paris, Lippmann delivered a grave address for the Thirteenth Reunion of the Harvard graduating class of 1910. The West, he lamented, faced an "organized mechanized evil lose in the world" because of "the lazy, self-indulgent materialism, the amiable, lackadaisical, footless, confused complacency of the free nations of the world." By ignoring the courage, resolve, and determination that marked the Western tradition, the democracies had played the prodigal son; they shunned the hard work of forging a lasting international peace; they disarmed the nation in order to

100Walter Lippmann, "Today and Tomorrow," June 15, 1940.
save money; they eluded the Western nations' responsibility for finding a just settlement of reparations and war debts. More frequently, Lippmann found meaning in the war through a privative view of evil within a humanist context. For Lippmann, it was the modernist who had abandoned his humanist roots:

The disaster in the midst of which we are living is a disaster in the character of men. It is a catastrophe of the soul of a whole generation which had forgotten, had lost, and had renounced the imperative and indispensable virtues of laborious, heroic, and honorable men.  

His pronouncement shared Niebuhr's recognition that history bore "a tragic character" -- a history rendered tragic by man's inability to bring his egoism completely under the dominion of his conscience. Like Niebuhr, Lippmann argued that the chaotic international situation resulted from a corruption of human freedom instead of a flaw in the economic structure.

That America was free to take decisive action against Germany, but chose instead to protect its own interests, demonstrated the insular selfishness of an isolationism which had dominated American foreign policy since 1919. That Congress in February, 1941 continued to debate the Lend-Lease bill, thought Lippmann, was due in part to the deep isolationist roots in U.S. foreign policy dating back to the Versailles peace settlement. This isolationism, thought Lippmann, accounted for world inflation and the deflation of public confidence during President Franklin Roosevelt's tenure in office. It accounted for America's severed ties with vital European alliances, the formulation of a separate peace, the failed reparations policy, and the Neutrality Acts of the late 1930's which forbid

---

lending money to European allies. America's will-to-power was also stunted by President Wilson himself, who had failed to unite the public by misrepresenting the true cause of World War I -- as a righteous crusade for democracy instead of a protection of American security. Although Lippmann believed President Wilson and the isolationists had contributed to the disaster, Lippmann stressed a universalist view in accounting for the evil of the war. He argued that all Americans should be held accountable for the crisis since "we all adopted the isolationist view of disarmament and separation." 102

Lippmann held out hope as late as December, 1941 that the United States could aid the Allies without sending troops to Europe. Yet the United States' deteriorating relations with Japan in the summer of 1941, in addition to Hitler's invasion of Russia in June of that year, made full participation seem more likely. In late October, 1941, responding to the Nazis' unprecedented brutalities against their vanquished victims, Lippmann wrote a timely column warning against an "ice cold evil" for which Americans were struggling to find a meaning for the first time.

Lippmann, beginning to confront the limits of his rationalism, argued that a Rousseauian thread in history, the reason and individualism of the Enlightenment, had obscured the true source of evil in the modern world:

The modern skeptical world has been taught for some 200 years a conception of human nature in which the reality of evil, so well known to the ages of faith, has been discounted. Almost all of us grew up in an environment of such easy optimism that we can scarcely know what is meant, though our ancestors knew it well, by the satanic will. We shall have to recover this forgotten but essential truth -- along with so many

102Walter Lippmann, "Today and Tomorrow," February 27, 1941.
others that we lost when, thinking we were enlightened and advanced, we were merely shallow and blind.\textsuperscript{103}

Drawing on the moral insights of history, Lippmann argued that an easy faith in progress failed to articulate the modern evil of totalitarianism. This was the problem of unbelief which he had illuminated in \textit{Preface to Morals}. Yet in that work, and thereafter throughout his career, Lippmann's lingering pragmatism seemed at odds with his burgeoning realism. In confronting the depths of moral evil, he continued to believe that a basic rational order undergirded the moral chaos of the international crisis. By relying on such a faith, he clung to a rationalism which proved an inadequate tool for addressing the philosophical and moral problems he raised.

Lippmann's belated shift in his policy position, from Wilsonian idealism to a realism focused on an enlightened national interest, raises a key question concerning the relationship between his political philosophy and his foreign policy: how could one who so acerbically attacked the evils of totalitarianism in the late 1930's, as Lippmann had in \textit{The Good Society}, stay within the confines of neutrality and offer so few practical measures against Hitler's advance?

Part of Lippmann's hesitancy can be attributed to his distaste for ideological crusades, which derived from his commitment to rational inquiry and dispassionate observation. During World War II, Lippmann did not take up the cause of some left-liberals in hailing the war as an ideological battle between democratic ideals and fascism. Nor did he consistently see fascism in a moral confrontation with democracy. While many American writers, artists, and film makers organized support for the Loyalists during the Spanish Civil War, hailing the Republican government a champion of democratic civil liberties against the authoritarianism of

\textsuperscript{103}Walter Lippmann, "Today and Tomorrow," October 30, 1941.
fascism, Lippmann stuck to a hands-off policy; the British and French, he thought, should contain the spread of fascism by organizing a "simple and disinterested" truce. Unlike many Popular Fronters, Lippmann did not see the Spanish conflict as a battle between absolute good and evil.

Nor did he propose measures against Hitler in the fall of 1937 that enunciated his moral outrage against Nazism. Following the announcement of the Anti-Comintern Pact in November, Lippmann recognized that the fascist powers trumped the liberal democracies in "their will to fight." His position seemed to imply that the remedy would be America's entry into the war. Yet he did not call for all-out opposition to Nazi tyranny: "This is not said in order to suggest even indirectly and by implication that there should be a military alliance to oppose this world-wide aggression...As things stand now, I do not see how anyone can responsibly favor so desperately dangerous a remedy." 104 Lippmann knew that appeasement was not the best course for the United States. Despite this realization, he failed to pursue a more aggressive course, one which might have entailed the abandonment of neutrality and the formation of an alliance with Britain and France.

In these matters, Lippmann did not match Niebuhr's impassioned social activism. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., observed that Niebuhr's early career battles against racism and the injustices of industrial life shows that he was "the child of the Social Gospel." 105 Niebuhr's talent for finding practical solutions for social problems was informed by the knowledge that God's judgment made

contingent all claims to power and formed the basis for his Christian radicalism throughout the 1930's. Lippmann also began his career as a social activist, assisting on muckraker journalist Lincoln Steffens' staff in 1910 and on Socialist George Lunn's mayoral campaign in 1912. Following the war, however, and throughout the rest of his career, he showed no interest in political activism. Biographer Ronald Steel suggested that Lippmann was foremost a political commentator in step with the public mood and less gifted at consistently applying ethical principles to a political context: "Lippmann's great talent lay in analysis and explanation, not in theorizing. When he went wrong, it was in trying to impose an intellectual grid...on situations about which he had conflicting feelings." 106

Schlesinger also found Lippmann was theoretically inconsistent throughout his career, but discovered a certain forcefulness in his thought which Schlesinger believed marked Lippmann's brilliance as a public intellectual. It allowed him to stay in touch with the world of fluctuating opinions, surpassing the academic's more narrow conception of "clear and settled" moral values: "As a thinker deeply responsive to the complex equilibrium of intellectual forces around him, he chose the role of helping produce public sense in the community rather than pursuing private truth in individual solitude. His intelligence was, in the best sense, polemical rather than either technical or prophetic; his particular gift was the sensitive lucidity with which he reacted to the intellectual ebb and flow of his culture." 107 As Schlesinger observed of both Lippmann and Niebuhr, they were as much a product of a progressive sensibility as they were moralists or essentialists.

Both Lippmann and Niebuhr understood the social character of ideas, and both believed that ideas were useless without having some degree of civic utility.

It was Lippmann more than Niebuhr who ran into difficulty reconciling his essentialism and his pragmatism, which explains Lippmann's problem in formulating a clear and precise public policy during the war. This became an ongoing problem for Lippmann in his search for an ethical basis for politics. In *A Preface to Morals* (1929), Lippmann's search for an apparatus to detect moral evil struggled to reconcile the need for an absolute moral structure with a scientific method of inquiry -- a method which could only mitigate evil in strictly relative terms. The issue continued to trouble Lippmann in the late 1930's, when his foreign policy prescriptions failed to address the absolutist implications of his warnings against the consequences of total war. In *The Good Society* (1937), Lippmann argued that the current revival of the concept of total war, a struggle for supremacy between superpowers, made obsolete traditional security measures which had relied on compromise to settle disputes between nations with limited war objectives. Since the totalitarian powers had now altered the terms of foreign engagement, thus necessitating Britain's involvement in the conflict as a supreme power, as Lippmann's argument went, logic dictated that the United States must intervene. Yet Lippmann did not pursue the argument to its logical conclusion. His support for strict neutrality, a position which he held from 1937 to 1939, seemed to evade the question.\(^{108}\) Despite his numerous pronouncements throughout the 1940's against President Wilson's inflexible moralism, Lippmann

\(^{108}\)Cary, pp. 129-130.
himself could not take a stronger stand against Nazism because he too was moving toward a more rigid acceptance of absolute values. 109

Yet Lippmann never completely gave up his pragmatism for metaphysical absolutes. For this reason, he was not a thoroughgoing essentialist or a monist wedded to the values of an absolute structure. As the course of his thinking in the interventionist debate showed, Lippmann was never comfortable with inflexible deterministic currents tending toward self-legitimization, such as naturalism. Neither of these, he believed, could account for the source of evil in modern life. Instead, he searched for a more pragmatic-based system, one that could measure the uncertain and amorphous nature of evil by some uniform and transcendental standard. Such a standard was needed at the time, given the moral abstractions that lay imbedded within liberalism which both Lippmann and Niebuhr tried to expose and counteract.

The Jewish Question

For Lippmann and Niebuhr, the peril of the isolationist position revealed a modern characteristic which raised the depths of human cruelty to a new level. The human tendency toward willed insouciance unveiled itself at mid-century as a new kind of evil, the product of the atomized masses which expressed a collective immorality within a techno-political environment. World War II built on the impersonal and technologically advanced methods of killing from World War I;

---

109 The contradiction between Lippmann's pragmatism and idealism has been observed by Francis Curro Cary, Robert Skotheim, and Ronald Steel.
the dissemination of poisonous gas, carpet bombing, and the atomic bomb rendered the nature of evil oblique and insidious. The mechanized conduct of the war rendered it less personal and therefore easier for Americans to distance themselves from it. As a result, the horror of the war began to fade from the moral center of the American conscience. Isolationists argued that Nazism was a European problem rather than an American problem, ignoring the unmentionables that lurked in the shadows of the national history -- white slave holders' conscious and unconscious acquiescence to slavery, the internment of Japanese Americans, the horrors perpetrated on anonymous masses in Nagasaki and Hiroshima.  

It was the Holocaust, however, more than any single tragedy, which defined the depths of human cruelty through willed insouciance. In the years following the war, when the American public struggled to grasp a horror which lay on the fringes of their collective conscience, they confronted their own blindness which had allowed for the extinction of some six million Jews. Historian Robert Westbrook observed that American intellectuals were no better prepared to find a meaning for the Holocaust than their European contemporaries. This was especially true of those within the New York circle, a group primarily of young, Jewish, cosmopolitan minded and anti-Stalinist thinkers. Westbrook noted that although the New York intellectuals considered themselves enlightened on the currents of European culture and politics, they offered merely a restrained response to the Holocaust. Whether their hesitation is attributable to the unprecedented nature of the tragedy which made it incommunicable, to their reliance on anti-Stalinism or the theory of totalitarianism, neither which found a place for the horrors of genocide, or simply the denial of their own Judaism, the

\[110^\text{Delbanco, The Death of Satan, pp. 192-195.}\]
New York intellectuals lacked the vocabulary to define the evils spawned by the Holocaust. 111

Among those who did address the moral implications of Nazi racism, Trotskyist Dwight Macdonald and Reinhold Niebuhr stood out as America's two most outspoken critics on the issue. Both made a pragmatic effort to transcend the old categorical abstractions of the liberal interpretation. The difference between their approaches, between Macdonald's anti-Stalinism and Niebuhr's Christian realism, is worth examining for several reasons. First, it shows the efficacy of Niebuhr's neo-orthodoxy in providing a penetrating examination of moral issues during the war. It was Niebuhr's insights into the sources of collective evil which transcended the somewhat oblique moral categories of Macdonald's response. Second, it reveals the limitations of the rationalist interpretation of the war, and thus helps to explain why Lippmann was so conspicuously absent on the issue.

In 1942, when Gerhart Riegner of the World Jewish Congress announced in Switzerland details of the Nazi program of genocide, the moral atrocities of the Holocaust began to creep into the American consciousness. The news spurred President Roosevelt, along with Stalin and Churchill, to sign a declaration to try Nazi war criminals in a court of law at war's end. The news also forced Roosevelt to reexamine the United States' Jewish refugee policy.

As more facts appeared throughout the war, a majority of the public, the administration, and the intellectual community struggled to imagine the scope of

the Nazi genocide. Macdonald, like many of his contemporaries, was slow to confront the news coming out of Germany, and considered the genocide as part of a long tradition of capitalist exploitation of the working classes. Upon hearing the chilling accounts from camp survivor Bruno Bettelheim in 1944, Macdonald made concerted efforts to expose the evils of the camps in his journal Politics, and he became one of the most outspoken critics of the U.S. refugee policy.  

In the March, 1945 issue of Politics, Macdonald published America's first important inquiry into the meaning of the Holocaust. "Responsibility of Peoples" challenged the widespread public belief among the Western nations that the German people themselves were to blame for the Nazi's crimes. The mass extinction of the Jews was not a program endemic to German folkways, and thus not strictly a problem of "collective guilt." Rather, the Holocaust was conceived and carried out by "a particular kind of German, specialists in torture and murder," which made the crisis a question of individual moral responsibility.

Macdonald also argued that although the entire German population had not been Nazified and made puppets of Hitler's regime, certain techno-political conditions had rendered Germans incapable of responsible action. "Modern society," he argued, "has become so tightly organized, so rationalized and routinized that it has the character of a mechanism which grinds on without human consciousness or control. The individual, be he 'leader' or mass man, is reduced to powerlessness vis-à-vis the mechanism. More and more, things happen TO people."  

---

As sensitive as Macdonald became to the plight of the Jews in Germany, his analysis was ultimately ambiguous. How could certain mid-level Nazi bureaucrats be morally responsible for their actions, yet also be excused for acting unconsciously and powerlessly within the mechanical functions of modern society? The ambiguity of Macdonald's analysis -- one that was further abstracted by his explanation of fascism arising from 'bureaucratic collectivism' -- illustrates the weakness of his utopian view of collective action. Westbrook argued that it was Macdonald's anti-war idealism which helped to cultivate his sensitivity to the moral issues of the Holocaust. Although Macdonald later admitted his anti-war position too utopian, it was a "creative mistake," suggested Westbrook, since it kept him in touch with political events in Europe and fueled his effort to unite ethics and politics. 114

While a strong moral stance against the evils of total war may have nourished Macdonald's critical perspective, it was Reinhold Niebuhr's anti-utopian perspective during the war and his understanding of the moral function of groups which furnished the most accurate assessment of the Jewish question. Niebuhr's insights into the psychology of racism appeared in his exposition of utopian ideologies, specifically, how utopianism both corrupted and obscured the limits of collective morality. For Niebuhr, the impulse toward moral perfectionism in the individual, an impulse that operated even more treacherously within the group, generated conscious and unconscious forms of eradicable evil. Equally important for Niebuhr was the fact that such moral perfectionism resided not only within the bigot, but also within liberal "educators" who argued that greater equality between races would eliminate race prejudice. Niebuhr's insight that evil could arise from

114 Westbrook, pp. 46-47.
such self-righteous crusades for democratic principles made him one of the first Americans to apply the observations of the early nineteenth century French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville to the context of totalitarianism. Like Tocqueville, Niebuhr argued that democracy in America worked against its own principles when based on the will of the majority, producing the conditions for fear and conformity rather than justice and equality.

Both Macdonald and Niebuhr recognized that modern political ideologies expressed a new evil in the form of willed insouciance. They saw that the ideologies of liberalism and fascism, shaped by the conditions of a mechanistic, rationalistic age, tended to homogenize distinctions derived from individual diversity. Where Niebuhr surpassed Macdonald, however, was in identifying the perfectionism of his anti-Stalinist position -- a perfectionism which simplistically conflated American and German imperialism. Thus, where Macdonald's analysis failed, according to Niebuhr, was in its inability to do "full justice to the infinite varieties and degrees of complicity in a group evil." 115

The advantage of Niebuhr's position was that it recognized, more than Macdonald's radicalism could, "the illusion that racial and ethnic distinction can be transcended in history to an indeterminate degree." It was the particular pride of such a "false universalism," thought Niebuhr, blind to the existence of a "collective psychology which is not easily altered by a little more enlightenment." 116

Niebuhr's understanding of how collective morality operated also reveals the strength of his Christian realism in coming to terms with Nazi racism. Niebuhr

contended that genocide gave evil a decidedly modern characteristic before most of his peers had tackled the issue. Although evil could still be explained as man's attempt to make himself greater than the whole, Niebuhr recognized that at mid-century it took its most insidious form in the collective will. Niebuhr was also among the first Protestant theologians to argue that individual sin and collective sin could not be separated; each articulated the other in revealing the various shades of evil present in collective life. While adherents of Marxism and of humanism criticized the individualistic nature of liberalism -- the former for its bourgeois self-interest, the latter for its stress on individualism rather than the organic community -- both theories, thought Niebuhr, failed to do "full justice to the infinite varieties and degrees of complicity in a group evil." 117 The Christian realist perspective argued that collective action was actually a form of original sin. Thus, it avoided idealizing any one form of the collective.

In the early 1930's, Niebuhr recognized the demonic function of anti-Semitism in Germany. "The fact is," he stated, "that the Nazis have a new mythology in which the Jew is cast in the role of the devil." 118 Like most observers at the time, Niebuhr underestimated the central place of anti-Semitism in the Nazi doctrine. Although he identified racial bigotry, along with national resentment and economic reaction, as part of a "devil's brew," he considered the Nazi's anti-Semitism "merely the tool of its reactionary policies." The pogroms against Jewish tradesmen and professionals existed as a diversionary tactic to appease the impoverished middle-classes and create the illusion of a viable

118 Reinhold Niebuhr, "Germany Must Be Told!" Christian Century, 50 no 32 (August 9, 1933), p. 1014.
economic program. Still observing the crisis of fascism as a Christian socialist, Niebuhr stressed that "the real sufferers from Nazi terror are the liberals, Socialists and Communists," which revealed that the real intent of the Nazis was "the annihilation of radicalism." 119

Although Niebuhr incorrectly considered the anti-Semitism of Nazi ideology secondary to the economic orientation of the movement, this does not obscure his profound analysis of the causes of anti-Semitism, which helped to show how collective evil operated. By placing anti-Semitism within an analytic framework of how majorities subsumed minorities, Niebuhr delineated the "infinite varieties and degrees of complicity in a group evil." 120 In Moral Man, Niebuhr argued that majorities which threatened to subsume minorities by their pretensions to moral superiority unleashed a more demonic force than what existed at the individual level. Niebuhr argued that the illiberal nature of anti-Semitism was practiced most forcefully within Germany, but was also part of a wider pattern "through which the whole modern era expresses itself politically." This was, in part, because "democracy presupposes the willingness of a minority to acquiesce in the policies of a majority." 121

By 1938, Niebuhr recognized Nazi anti-Semitism in more demonic terms. Responding to the Nazi confiscation of Jewish property in Vienna in June, 1938, Niebuhr pronounced the Nazi's "general reign of terror" as revealing "the ultimate in man's sadistic tendencies toward his fellow." 122 By the late 1930's and early

1940's, Niebuhr had replaced his radicalism with the language of theology. Several months after Niebuhr resigned from the Socialist Party in May, 1940, he stressed that the plight of Jews in Europe was ignored and obscured by the simple moralism of Christianity, a moralism which failed to understand the Nazi will to power:
"There is actually no organ of comprehension in the bourgeois soul for this demonic religion of Nazism" he stated. 123 The moral perfectionism of the Social Gospel overlooked the fact that race pride, originating ultimately not from a lingering barbarism but arising as a common product of all human souls, "is a perennial corruption of man's collective life on every level of social and moral achievement." "Race pride," he continued, "is one of the many aspects of man's collective life which have been obscured by our contemporary culture. This culture has assumed that pride of race is no more than a vestigial remnant of barbarism and that increasing education would overcome it." 124

Niebuhr recognized that collective psychology, generated in relations between cultural and ethnic groups, produced an evil unknown on the individual level and thus it escaped the liberal eye. Modern liberalism was blind to the survival impulse of the collective because of its "individualistic and universalist presuppositions and illusions." Niebuhr saw that the problem of collective extinction went unrecognized because of the perfectionism imbedded to various degrees in both the liberal democratic and Nazi ideologies. Both systems shared the illusion that "racial and ethnic distinctions can be transcended in history to an indeterminate degree." The liberal precept that tolerance and good will could eliminate race prejudice actually de-legitimized Judaism as a nation or ethnicity. It

123 Christianity and Society, vol. 5, no. 4 (Fall, 1940), p.2-3.
obscured the fact that "the bigotry of majority groups toward minority groups which affront the majority by diverging from the dominant type is a perennial aspect of man's collective life. The force of it may be mitigated, but it cannot be wholly eliminated."\footnote{Reinhold Niebuhr, "Jews After the War," \textit{Nation} (February, 1942), pp. 215-216.}

For Niebuhr, history confirmed the limitations of liberal individualism. The problem of "collective extinction" was mostly dangerously preserved in the racial attitudes of liberal observers. The Christian Church's scientific method, which insisted there were neither pure races nor inferior races, proved an inadequate gauge for all forms of racism since it "does not measure the tragedy of racial bigotry deeply enough" -- a bigotry which rested between ignorance and malice. Thus, in confronting the problem of racism empirically, the Church had actually sublimated the its evil.

Macdonald's definition of the Holocaust made a valiant attempt at reassessing the nature of evil during the war. In identifying the Nazi program for genocide as a crime against "the very nature of mankind," Macdonald's analysis shared the humanists' interpretation of fascism as a moral perversion of basic civic virtue. It sought to transcend the old moral and political categories of the 1930's for relating ethics and politics. It offered a universal standard to protect against the demonization of one people, race, or nation.

Macdonald's distrust of arbitrary authority provided a certain strength to his analysis of the Holocaust. Yet his anti-Stalinism and the anarchic individualism of his early career were inadequate in measuring all forms of collective evil, and his rationalist approach created certain contradictions. As Robert Westbrook points
out, Macdonald's first argument in "Responsibility of Peoples" could not account for the evil derived from human inaction; "it slighted the role of the 'desk murderers' who had functioned as part of the machinery of administrative massacre yet who killed no one and took no administrative initiative of their own." The latter argument, he observed, "unwittingly provided all the historical and sociological components of the 'cog in a machine' argument later advanced in their own defense by Nazi organization men like [Adolph] Eichmann." 126

The weakness of Macdonald's argument illustrates the failure of a rationalist interpretation of the Holocaust -- a rationalism to which Lippmann was fully committed. In some respects, it was Lippmann and not Macdonald who made the most accurate assessment of Nazi anti-Semitism. Lippmann did not share Macdonald's anti-Stalinist interpretation of Nazi genocide as part of the historical continuity of industrial capitalism. Because of this, Lippmann could consider the psychological evil behind Nazi genocide as one that derived principally from a bankruptcy of the human spirit. Since the early 1940's, Lippmann had argued that the evil which fueled Nazism originated within the human soul. Like Macdonald, however, Lippmann saw the progressive spirit of the Western world as a long protest against authority and domination. This tenet of enlightenment thought defined liberty as the freedom of individual action and thus could not account for the varieties of evil caused by individual inaction. 127

---

127 As Daniel Rice has pointed out, this was also one of Niebuhr's major criticisms of Dewey's naturalism and what Niebuhr considered Dewey's confidence in a pure reason in human affairs. "Dewey," he said, "was certainly not oblivious to the facts of self-interest, the ideological taint, or class prejudices." Nevertheless, Niebuhr was correct in his "strenuous rejection of Dewey's oft-repeated charge that among the obstacles to the social sciences the most prominent are an authoritarian institutional history and a pattern of obscurantism and recalcitrance promulgated by religious superstition, ignorance, and language." Rice, Reinhold Niebuhr and John Dewey, p. 118.
For most of his life, Lippmann believed that some fundamental structure of order or rationality existed in the world. As much as he committed to this guiding faith, he also recognized that the optimism of enlightenment thought could not explain the demonic expressions within modernism. Yet he never conjured the flexibility to depart from his commitment to scientific rationality enough to find a meaning for the evil of the Holocaust. Although Macdonald and Lippmann diverged considerably in their politics, both shared a faith in rational intelligence as a vehicle for social change -- a tool which proved an inadequate measure for the irrational nature of the Nazi death camps.

Niebuhr's and Lippmann's efforts to expose the obstinacy of the isolationist position, and Niebuhr's inquiry into the nature of the evils of the Holocaust, were the efforts of two prominent mainstream liberal intellectuals in response to the mainstream currents of mid-century liberalism. Their most penetrating expositions on American democracy, Niebuhr's *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944) and Lippmann's *Essays in the Public Philosophy* (1955), have recently been interpreted by certain historians not as critiques of and within the liberal tradition, as they were designed. Rather, they are viewed as works that epitomize the celebration of Cold War consensus values and the individualistic, pluralistic brand of liberalism that flourished in the post-war period.

The underlying implications of this criticism is that too many intellectuals during the late 1930's and early 1940's abandoned their critical perspective, thereby relinquishing all possibilities for real social democratic changes by the end of the
war. Examining the effects of the intellectuals' abandonment of their anti-Stalinism on the post-war intellectual climate, historian Judy Kutulas proclaims that the real heroes during the McCarthy period were those progressive liberals who stuck to their radical principles, not the vital centrist liberals who complied with numerous civil liberty violations. Kutulas thinks that liberal anti-Communism was about compromise, complacency, and an a preoccupation with the self. She stresses that vital centrists "never really confronted the extent to which they protected the status quo." 128

Other historians who, like Kutulas, retain a sympathy for the progressive-pragmatic sensibility for social equality and justice, argue that the mainstreaming of the liberal left engendered certain moral and political abstractions. Some of these criticisms have fallen heavily on Niebuhr. Historian Frank Warren chides Niebuhr as the leader of an anemic liberal left which sold out to the moderate politics of the New Deal. "Niebuhr," maintains Warren, "had a pessimistic view of human nature and wrote about the inability of the liberal mind to understand the nature of evil." Yet Niebuhr's perspective failed to articulate "a tragic view of the world in 1945," continues Warren, because "he connected the pessimistic view of human nature with a politics that emphasized the 'realistic' limits of social change." For James Kloppenberg, the liberal reaction to totalitarianism spawned "Manichean formulations" incompatible with the lost virtues of the pragmatic liberal tradition -- among these, a revolutionary spirit committed to social change and "an awareness of uncertainty" that vindicated the progressive spirit.

Kloppenberg suggests that in placing all totalitarian regimes in dichotomous opposition to the optimistic "children of light," as Niebuhr did, or in

128 Judy Kutulas, "'Totalitarianism' Transformed" pp. 71-88.
measuring the evils of majoritarian democracy against the absolute standard of natural law, as did Lippmann, both helped to build the dualisms of cold war thought which simplified rather than clarified distinctions between political theories. Their revulsion against moral relativism, argues Kloppenberg, confirmed Dewey's prophetic insight that "those who invoked religious, moral, political, or economic absolutes themselves fed a dangerous intolerance that could stifle dissent." 129

Kloppenberg's criticism of Niebuhr's and Lippmann's "Manichean formulations," which Kloppenberg suggests underpinned the liberal intellectuals' supposed celebration of consensus and constitutional democracy of the 1940's, directly challenges the universalist position that both used to attack the absolute moral categories of progressive liberalism. It suggests that in adopting a monistic transcendental standard, Lippmann and Niebuhr were themselves blinded to the contingencies of history, and in turn to all possible forms and shapes of evil that arose from the relative nature about truths in human experience.

The political categories that Niebuhr and Lippmann established in their respective expositions on liberal democracy were indeed polemical. Yet their categories in no way blurred the variety of moral distinctions between good and evil. Nor did they suggest a capitulation of their independent or critical perspective as intellectuals. While it may be that Lippmann in The Public Philosophy stood furthest from the pragmatism of his early career, Niebuhr in The Children of Light was far from abandoning the pragmatism that informed his

theology and that lent so much depth to his realist critique of idealistic and naturalistic currents in liberalism.\textsuperscript{130}

It was in fact Niebuhr's pragmatism which enabled him to disassemble the pretensions of bourgeois individualism from democratic theory -- the very pretensions which he believed made modern democracy fallacious and which obscured all existing forms of evil. Niebuhr stressed that because modern democracy was born from bourgeois civilization, evil in a democratic society was "always the assertion of some self-interest without regard to the whole." This exposed two oversights within liberalism concerning the nature of evil. First, liberal culture proved unwilling to gauge adequately the power of self-interest. Second, the optimism of liberal tradition was "unconscious of the corruption of self-interest in all ideal achievements and pretensions in human culture." Niebuhr stressed that the second error was more hazardous than the first, noting "how much more plausible and dangerous the corruption of the good can be in human history than explicit evil."\textsuperscript{131}

For Niebuhr, the optimism of liberal bourgeois culture underestimated the necessary relationship between the individual and the community, and thus failed to justify the ideal of democracy "in a convincing way." Only the indefinite limits of human vitalities vindicated the dynamism of a free society: "The community

\textsuperscript{130}Daniel Rice demonstrated that Niebuhr's connection to pragmatism has been overlooked by most authors. He argues that "the relationship between theology and pragmatism in Niebuhr seems to have been dialectical and not dichotomous," and that Niebuhr's realism was more in opposition to a pragmatic rationalism of the liberal tradition, and not simply "pragmatic liberalism" Daniel Rice, Reinhold Niebuhr and John, p. 264. See also Robert E. Fitch, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Philosophy of History," in Kegley and Bretall, eds., Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Reinhold Niebuhr's Role in American Political Thought and Life," pp. 190-222.

must constantly reexamine the presuppositions upon which it orders life, because no age can fully anticipate or predict the legitimate and creative vitalities which may arrive in subsequent ages." Yet the indeterminable limits of the human spirit also meant that "the limitations upon freedom in a society are justified, on the other hand, by the fact that the vitalities may be destructive." 132 Thus, Niebuhr concluded in his famous proposition: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary." 133

Niebuhr should have been uncomfortable with the dichotomy implied by his title because in his formulation, neither child alone apprehended the full potentialities of human existence. Liberal optimists, or the "children of light," while correct in believing that self interest should be brought under a higher law of reason, misjudged moral cynics who abandoned reason in pursuit of the will-to-power. Pessimists within the ranks of reaction, or the "children of darkness," although well acquainted with the utility of coercion to unify a community, overlooked the extent to which reason could serve the purposes of justice and liberty.

To correct this imbalance, Niebuhr searched for "a more realistic philosophical and religious basis" for democracy. He maintained that only the Christian view of human nature accounted for both the optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. Christian humility supported the toleration required by democracy, just as democratic structures provided a socio-political foundation for Christian grace. Only this combination of Christian humility and democracy recognized that "the twin evils [of] tyranny and anarchy, represent the Scylla and Charybdis

132Reinhold Niebuhr, The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness, p. 64.
133Ibid, axe.
between which the frail bark of social justice must sail."  

Niebuhr believed both anarchy and tyranny to be perennial evils in modern democracy -- the former because of the indeterminate heights of human vitalities were destructive as well as creative, the latter because of the democratic governmental restraints against individual liberty also knew no bounds.

For Niebuhr, democracy was not the perfect political system but the best system. Not only did democracy give the fullest expression to the human spirit; it was also flexible enough to check the expanding impulses of human vitalities through coercive methods without degenerating into tyranny. What prevented democratic governments from wielding inordinate power in their check on individual power?  Niebuhr stressed that since no clear distinction could be made between ordinate and inordinate power, all formalist solutions proved inadequate. Niebuhr instead called for the establishment of working principles of higher justice to check arbitrary power. Only the democratic system, he believed, was flexible enough to provide "a method of finding proximate solutions for insoluble problems." Only democracy offered the necessary self-regulating, self-correcting mechanisms to judge each problem of justice as it arose. Democracy found the correct balance between centralization and efficiency on the one hand, and free market individualism on the other, between too much and too little application of economic power.  

Niebuhr's conception of democracy, as a man-made tool for gauging and articulating the fluctuating forms of evil in society, followed closely within the tradition of philosopher William James.  While at Yale Divinity school in the spring

---

Niebuhr's B.D. thesis entitled, "The Validity and Certainty of Religious Knowledge," drew heavily on James's pragmatism, praising his denial of metaphysical determinism and his belief that religious experience could establish the reality of a higher power.  

Niebuhr was much in line with James in viewing the universe as a dynamic entity and uncontainable because of the ever changing nature of human experience. Both James and Niebuhr saw truth not as a static property but as something that evolved within a social process according to the relativity of the observer. For Niebuhr, to measure nature and history by a single world view threatened to subsume the injustices of society which otherwise went unexpressed and undetected. Niebuhr never thought that metaphysical or societal absolutes legitimized themselves. Rather, he conceived of democracy as a pragmatic tool for revealing truths, and one that vindicated all the possibilities for social justice that a liberal society could offer.

Like Niebuhr’s, Lippmann's conception of human nature led to his pessimism about the inter workings of modern democracy. But he also believed, as did Niebuhr, that democracy was a dynamic social project which could be utilized effectively as a tool of social justice. And like Niebuhr, Lippmann knew that relative moral perspectives must be balanced and judged against a universal transcendental standard, else a battle of wills in a pluralistic society degenerated into anarchy.

In 1938, Lippmann began his last major philosophical work which sought to delineate the principles of a higher law and establish the need for a system of

---

ultimate moral values. In *Essays in the Public Philosophy*, Lippmann linked the blindness of liberalism to the ascendancy of popular democracy. Majoritarian rule, thought Lippmann, had disturbed the traditional balance of power between the government and the people. In abandoning a "public philosophy," modern democracies had forgotten the distinction between the voters and the people. Traditionally, the public philosophy "provided a standard of public and private action which promoted, facilitated, and protected the institutions of freedom and the growth of democracy." Once the liberal democracies made morality a private concern, an individual's idea of freedom no longer derived from the universal order. It became a matter of personal discretion.

This was the problem Lippmann identified in gauging evil within modern society -- that humanity had become unaware of its own sinful nature. Since the early 1940's, Lippmann had argued that a privative evil infected liberal democracy: The "sickness of the Western liberal democracies," he posited just before America entered the war, resulted from "a deep disorder in our society which comes not from the machinations of our enemies and from the adversities of the human condition but from within ourselves."  

For Lippmann, the moral insight of the ancient order -- an ability to find compromise within diversity and an awareness of man's moral responsibility for the evil of the world -- had been eclipsed by a growing majoritarian tumor imbedded in liberal democracy. What made Western democracy dysfunctional, thought Lippmann, was its exposure to the perversities of popular opinion and the pressures of mass rule. Governments erred in investing too much power in the

---

hands of representative assemblies, party bosses, agents of pressure groups, and
leaders of mass communications -- all who lacked the specialized knowledge,
foresight, and rational discipline to apply such power responsibly. A democracy
which divested too much power in the will of the people failed to meet the
challenges of modern government.

In turn, the public psyche had constructed a dualistic conception of evil, to
which democratic leaders were forced to cater because of the nature of public
opinion. The excitable masses forced policy makers to use moral blame as a
political tool to manufacture support for wars. Since the isolationist-leaning
masses could only understand international politics in strictly Manichean and
utopian terms, politicians courted the masses by portraying the enemy as "evil
incarnate, as absolute and congenital wickedness." Such "impassioned nonsense,"
thought Lippmann, exposed the dangers of making the world safe for democracy.

For Lippmann, this view of evil as a culpable entity in the other,
underpinned by a relativism which destroyed all measurable standards for gauging
moral evil, had ultimately contributed to the success of massed-based totalitarian
movements. He argued that modern revolutionary theories like Marxism
borrowed from the Jacobin model of revolution in order to incite the masses to
action. "Again and again," he observed, "it has been proven how effective is this
formula for arousing, sustaining, and organizing men's energies for revolution: to
declare that evil in society has been imposed upon the many by the few -- by

priests, nobles, capitalists, imperialists, liberals, aliens -- and that evil will disappear when the many who are pure have removed these few who are evil." 139

Lippmann saw a "totalitarian tendency" imbedded in the utopianism of modern revolutionary movements. Such utopian schemes, based on a benevolent idea of human nature -- that man needed no restraints on the self, only the means to change his environment in order to eliminate evil -- ignored the sin of pride, or "the disposition of our first natures" as Lippmann put it. Consequently, the revolutionary was engaged "in an everlasting war with the human condition: war with the finitude of man and with the moral ends of finite men, and therefore, war against freedom, against justice, against the laws and against the order of the good society -- as they are conserved in the traditions of civility, as they are articulated in the public philosophy." 140

Since the transient whims of public opinion dominated rational debate, the nation needed a moral standard for distinguishing between good and bad on rational terms. The dysfunction of modern democracy had eclipsed this standard, to the point where "there is no public criterion of the true and false, of the right and wrong, beyond that which the preponderant mass of voters, consumers, readers, and listeners happen at the moment to be supposed to want." 141

Lippmann argued that the rise of popular democracy endangered the very principles of democracy itself, which were founded in pragmatism. He cited English author John Milton's address to parliament in the Areopagitica of 1643, which argued that popular democracy threatened the freedom of speech; that the most passionate will within a democratic society should become truth betrayed the

139 Ibid, 69.
140 Ibid, 86, 87.
141 Ibid, 110.
dialectic of the rational debate, where opposing points of view contested to produce true ideas within a rational forum. In this respect, one could not know the good without knowing the evil. 142

Only through "sincere inquiry" and "rational debate" within a rational order could the public expect to distinguish between right and wrong, between "the good which leads to the realization of human ends, and the evil which leads to destruction and to the death of civility." Lippmann suggested that scientific inquiry could fulfill this task, provided that the public philosophy became the absolute standard for every culture and society. With the revival of a public philosophy, a community of civility would protect against the disorder of factional, class, racial, and religious wars. 143

Like Niebuhr, Lippmann believed that the evil of totalitarianism was an expression of man's primeval nature and must be countered by his rationality: "the disposition of our first natures, or our natural and uncivilized selves" must yield to our "second and more rational nature." For Lippmann, this meant the revival of a tradition of civility embodied in the public philosophy. Such a philosophy, a historical creation of rational individuals, was based on the precepts of natural law which held both the ruler and the sovereign people in check.

Lippmann's argument stayed true to the rationalist convictions he embraced throughout his career. Several historians, however, find more inconsistency in Lippmann's work, suggesting that his argument failed to differentiate between relative claims on the nature of evil. Robert Skotheim observed that by relying on an inherent goodness of the Western tradition of civility, Lippmann could offer

142Ibid, 125-6.
143Ibid, 134, 136.
neither a pragmatic nor an ideal justification for his concept of natural law. The universal ethical order he upheld, superior for enshrining inviolable human rights and freedoms, rested on an absolute standard which limited its self-critical perspective. According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Lippmann in The Phantom Public, published in 1925, was founded on a much different philosophy than The Public Philosophy. In the earlier work, Lippmann sought to overcome the irreducible pluralism of modern life by maintaining "a regime of rule, contract, and custom" by means of democratic procedures. In his later work, however, this goal was self-justifying and therefore self-defeating. Lippmann's public philosophy rested on a transcendental faith, and thus it "abolish[ed] the very pluralism which originally produced it." 144

Schlesinger did not consider Lippmann a pragmatist. He pointed out that Lippmann himself, toward the end of his career, admitted that philosopher George Santayana's idea of eternal essences had influenced him more than James' radical empiricism.145 This said, there is also much evidence in The Public Philosophy that shows Lippmann's pragmatic mind. As historian D. Steven Blum noted, Lippmann believed that people were responsive primarily to pragmatic arguments, and he accordingly wanted to prove the utility of the public philosophy, its "practical relevance and productivity." Blum demonstrated convincingly that while Lippmann expressed his most strident opposition against subjectivism in The Public Philosophy, he expressed a commitment to cosmopolitan values that stayed true to British socialist Graham Wallace's vision of the Great Society. Blum pointed to Lippmann's appreciation for Alexander the Great's social philosophy,

144 Robert Skotheim, Totalitarianism and American Social Thought, passim; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Politics of Hope, p. 150.
145 Ibid, 127.
based the principle of "accommodation among the varieties of men." He also recounted Lippmann's belief that private property and free speech should be dynamic rather than absolute rights, subject to regular governmental review in order to keep pace with the changes in societal norms. Blum also observed that while much of Lippmann's argument for natural law was "overblown," this has obscured "the degree to which Lippmann fell back on the ordinarily accepted canons of Western constitutionalism -- procedural norms, the dedication to obtaining the consent of the governed, the idea of government as a contract between governors and the governed." 146 Blum shows that Lippmann's idea of the public philosophy was a mix of pragmatism and idealism -- the same philosophical principles which shaped his ideas about the nature and origins of evil.

Lippmann's concept of natural law lacked Niebuhr's balance between prophetic hope and rational inquiry -- a synthetic capable of comprehending the irrational and fanatical passions of mass political movements and anticipating future forms of evil. That the natural prejudices which defined a community's beliefs and customs should be a necessary component of social justice within a democratic society found no place in Lippmann's rationalistic world view. Without a grasp of the relative, one could never fully grasp the nature of evil.

Lippmann's Public Philosophy paralleled his Preface to Morals in its search for a "tradition of civility." In both works, Lippmann valued ultimate questions over experimentation, and believed that speculative thought should precede practice. As John Diggins pointed out, both works were characterized by Lippmann's turn away from James' pragmatism and toward James' colleague

146 D. Steven Blum, Walter Lippmann: Cosmopolitanism in the Century of Total War, pp. 141-155, 156.
George Santayana's Platonism. Lippmann now favored the contemplative and imaginative capacity of the mind over practical and utilitarian considerations. Nevertheless, Lippmann's emphasis on the processes and functions of government and his long quotation of Charles Sanders Peirce concerning the belief that truth can be attained through unobstructed scientific inquiry revealed the interests of a pragmatist. In this sense, Lippmann was displaying the tensions that he carried throughout his life, between disinterestedness and commitment, reason and imagination, authority and freedom.

Comparing these final two works of Niebuhr and Lippmann, one is indeed struck by the polemical abstractions of the rhetoric. Lippmann's heavy-handed diatribe against the whims of majoritarian rule seemed to demonize the failings of popular government, making the public philosophy a panacea for the sicknesses of modern democracy. The rhetoric he used to support his argument for natural law, as "a common conception of law and order which possesses a universal validity," led critics such as Schlesinger to considered it a self-legitimizing proposition. In this sense, Lippmann's public philosophy appeared to constrict rather than support diversity of opinion. Niebuhr's dichotomy contrasting the children of light against the children of darkness, and his tendency to abstract all functional forms of democracy, also seemed to limit possibilities for social change. In stressing the second half of his proposition over the first -- man's inclination toward injustice made democracy necessary -- Niebuhr expressed a pessimism about human nature.

---

148 Ibid, 521.
that suggested democracy existed because it had to, not because it was a proven experimental method for social justice.

At their core, however, these works were about liberation and not legitimization. Both eschewed formalistic social schemes, arguing that laws became static and useless to society unless they were consistently reviewed by government. Both rejected the individualistic basis for property rights of the nineteenth century, instead seeking to rediscover the older organic conception of public virtue of the liberal tradition, one that appreciated the wholeness of humanity which could recognize its full potential for both good and evil. In this respect, Lippmann and Niebuhr argued that the virtues of democracy lay in its tradition of pragmatism. Democracy, they thought, worked best when it served the interests of society, not when it dictated obedience by imposed implacable structures of higher authority.

Lippmann and Niebuhr began their careers as social activists and both retained this sensibility throughout their lives. They believed that the possibilities and limitations of humanity had been tested through historical experience. Only those who understood the successes and failures of the past could conjure the necessary spiritual and rational power to meet the challenge of totalitarianism. History, they thought, explained the nature of human beings. Democracy, a time-tested truth, illuminated and supported the full human spirit.

In this respect, their inquiry into the nature and origins of evil adhered to the pragmatic tradition. The challenges to social justice and to the survival democracy itself during the war demanded some acceptance of an absolute standard. Rather than closing off possibilities for uncovering the truth, however, Niebuhr and Lippmann accepted such a standard as a means to an end. Exposing
the blindness in the collective consciousness of a liberal society, they searched for a more solid base for pluralism, one that balanced the competing wills of a nation with a greater awareness of how power corrupted human ideals, and how such ideals were still viable in a world dictated by power.
Conclusion

During the first half of the Cold War era, the language of sin, tragedy, and the limits of human nature came into vogue unlike any other period of the twentieth century. Lippmann's Today and Tomorrow column was a daily fixture for a majority of Americans. A James Thurber cartoon printed in the 1943 edition of The New Yorker depicted a wife glancing from her newspaper to comment to her husband "Lippmann scares me this morning." In the late 1940's and early 1950's, when the horrors of Nazism and the atomic bomb led Americans to reconsider the idea of progress, Niebuhr's works began to attract a large secular and well as religious readership. "Man's Story Is Not a Success Story," read the headline of Time magazine's twenty-fifth anniversary issue in March, 1948. Its cover pictured Niebuhr fixated in dour and contemplative expression with dark and ominous clouds forming behind him.

Scholars in academia paralleled the public's inclination toward objectivity and certainty. Historians in the post-war years who doubted the progressive paradigm of the "people versus the interests," the insurgent scholarship that characterized much of the inter-war period, now welcomed the neo-orthodox appreciation for complexity and paradox in human nature. Niebuhr's concept of irony, through which he deconstructed the contradictions behind America's claims to virtue, wisdom, and power, influenced a generation of scholars who came of age during the depression and World War II, including Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Perry Miller, Henry May, and C. Vann Woodward, among others. In Woodward's case, Niebuhr's insights into the collective conscience helped him recognize that "the tragic aspects and ironic implications of [Southern] history have been
obscured by the national legend of success and victory and by the perpetuation of infant illusions of innocence and virtue."  149  For Woodward, defeat endowed Southerners with "the rare combination of detachment and sympathy," the moral consciousness required to recognize insouciance in the post-war era.

On the whole, however, only a minority of scholars were criticizing the premises of the military-industrial complex. In academia, a faith in the viability of objective research and the belief that a consensus of values that underpinned American history replaced the old appreciation for relativism and insurgent scholarship. The United States was quickly developing into a technically and bureaucratically efficient mass producing and mass consuming society. Yet at what price came the pursuit of this perfectibility? America made advances in technology, science, politics, social reform, and education while America's inner cities rotted away and indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia were uprooted and pulverized in the name of democracy. Was the neo-orthodox message really striking a chord within a climate of progress and perfectibility?

Historian Christopher Lasch posed this question in his penultimate book The True and Only Heaven. Lasch, who identified more with Niebuhr's organic appreciation for particularism than with Lippmann's one-sided critique of communitarian democracy, was strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School's criticism of mass culture. Lasch saw that the essential achievement of the Marxist critique was to uncover the moral pretensions of a power elite that had destroyed the public's capacity for moral judgment. For Lasch, a society centered on "pseudo-events," manufactured values, and vicarious living was structured not on

moral consensus but an obsession for "credibility" -- a posturing that suggested "not merely that our public officials no longer cared about the truth but that they had lost even the capacity to distinguish it from falsehood. All that mattered was the particular version of unreality the public could be induced to 'buy.'"

In one sense, Lasch affirmed Lippmann's argument in *Public Opinion* that the rise of mass communications had excluded the public from effective political participation. Lasch, however, also provided a most penetrating critique of Lippmann, arguing that he had underestimated both the moral virtues of the masses and the manipulative potential of the governing elite. President Johnson's pretense for entering the Vietnam conflict, the Watergate scandal, and Nixon's secret bombing campaign in Cambodia later seemed to suggest that a democracy run by experts could lead to far more malicious consequences than could the excesses of self-rule.

America's role abroad occupied most of Lippmann's and Niebuhr's attention in the post-war period. Both invoked a realist critique of liberal policy making, warning against the easy temptation toward national pride that concealed the weaknesses of American democracy. Eschewing the premises of unlimited economic growth and the dogmatism of the progressive reformer, they stressed the limits of America's power and denied the centrality of ideology in American foreign policy. Both saw President Wilson's "naive" moralism as the bane of an effective post-war foreign policy. Near the end of the war, the American public and Popular Front intellectuals carried their own visions of a progressive future, ones that imagined a world open to American economic and political influence.

---

Presidential candidate Henry Wallace's ideal for a "democratic revolution," his disavowal of power alliances in favor of plans for international peace, and his call for conciliation with the Soviet Union dominated the Progressive Party agenda in 1948.

Both Lippmann and Niebuhr avoided a fanatical, polemic, Manichean view of the Soviet Union, and tended to stress the complexity of motives and outcomes in foreign policy rather than what they considered to be the dualisms of progressivism. Yet they disagreed on what should be the United States' response to Soviet aggression in Europe, in addition to what constituted the proper course of action in Korea. It was not until President Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam war in 1967 that they agreed on the dire moral implications of the conflict.

Lippmann's foreign policy, as he worked it out first in _U.S. Foreign Policy_ (1943) and then in _U.S. War Aims_ (1944), called for the primacy of U.S. national interest and of each nations' sphere of influence. Whereas Lippmann's public philosophy aimed to balance the "real" and "ideal," or the world of everyday life with the transcendent and spiritual "realm of essence," his foreign policy followed a more pragmatic path. For Lippmann, the abstractions of rights and duties, plans for world parliament, and proposals to outlaw war like the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1927 simply did not account for the self-interest that underlay the persistence of international conflict. This was direct and practical advice, offering a workable, flexible foreign policy for the post-war era: the United States must learn to balance its power with its commitments. Lippmann downgraded ideologically driven policy. Harmonious relations between nations was not possible given the differing aims and objectives of each nation. Modus vendi based on compromise was the most workable policy attainable.
This put Lippmann at odds with the Truman administration's increasingly hard line Soviet policy. Truman, pointed out Lippmann, had hastily cut off Lend-Lease, pared down the German reparation figures suggested at Yalta, ignored Russia's request for a reconstruction loan to rebuild the obliterated Russian economy, and instituted a loyalty program to root out subversives in the State Department.

Lippmann saw the Truman Doctrine as America's carte blanche in international affairs. Truman and Acheson, he thought, clothed the Greek-Turkish military aid bill in ideological rhetoric in order to win public approval, and the bill itself represented vague global policies with undefined limits. Lippmann thought it would be strategically futile for the United States to commit to containing the spread of Communism wherever the threat might arise. The administration, he thought, must avoid overextending itself by balancing its power with its commitments. This meant focusing the United States' opposition to Communism in Europe, where its vital interests lay, and not in Asia.

Limiting foreign policy objectives was not the Truman administration's idea of a morally or strategically responsible foreign policy. In the summer of 1947, Sovietologist George Kennan's "Mr. X" article appeared in *Foreign Affairs* -- an assessment that helped to underpin the ideological support of containment theory. Kennan announced that a messianic ideology and a paranoid sense of insecurity guided Soviet policy. The Soviet governing body legitimized and sustained its authority by oppressing the masses and maintaining an imperialistic drive for world domination. Kennan argued the only way the United States could stop the fanatical spread of Communism was to apply counter force at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points throughout the world.
Lippmann refuted Kennan's early characterization of Russia as dogmatic and fanatical. He believed Kennan incorrectly emphasized Marxist dogma over Russian history. Stalin did not invent the Soviets' desire to control Eastern Europe and Mediterranean ports, rather the Tsars had practiced it for centuries in response to real security interests. Lippmann also pointed out that only a few years had passed since Russia had faced invading Nazi panzer divisions on its western border, when Hitler had moved through Eastern Europe during World War II. Thus, Russia's security fears, argued Lippmann, had a rational basis.

Lippmann's conviction that Russia's truculence was a defensive stand against Western aggression separated him from Kennan's early Cold War policy. It was this pragmatism that put him at odds with the administration's growing polemical view of Russia and maintained his universalist position of evil. The debate over the Marshall Plan demonstrated this ideological split. Truman and Acheson saw the Marshall Plan as the rationale for keeping a foothold in Eastern Europe; it offered a means to exert economic and military pressure to force a Soviet withdrawal in Eastern Europe. Lippmann, however, was strongly against forming an independent West German State because he thought it would cement divisions in Europe. Instead, he proposed a joint withdrawal of Soviet and American troops. Russian imperialism, he thought, could not be demonstrated conclusively until tested. Thus, the West must offer Russia realistic and viable terms for a withdrawal before it could determine whether or not the Soviets were intent on an invasion of Europe.

In the late 1940's, Lippmann remained pragmatic about the United States' aims and resources and retained a skepticism about the viability of ideology in foreign policy. A year before the NATO treaty passed the Senate in late July,
1949, Lippmann argued that it strained U.S. resources by committing the country to local defenses, it assembled a weak and tenuous group of U.S. allies that offered little means of deterrence, and it represented an obtuse and imprudent exclusion of Russia and Communist states. The United States, he argued, should avoid engaging in theaters "not of our own choosing and where no decision can ever be had."\textsuperscript{151} Although Lippmann cautiously approved Truman's decision to send supplies to South Korea, he warned that choosing a joint U.S.-South Korean counter-offensive to the 38th parallel over economic sanctions, and air and naval power would mean Chinese involvement and heavy U.S. casualties. With the publication of the China White Paper in August, 1949 and the "fall" of China, the administration began to put limits on its areas of commitment in Asia.

Did Lippmann see the evil of Stalinism given that he was more willing than most administration policy makers to compromise with the Soviets during the 1944 to 1952 period? Did Lippmann's pragmatism underestimate the imperial ambitions of Communism, as biographer Ronald Steel suggested, because his policy tended to focus on tactics rather than goals and lacked "a philosophical approach or ideal commitment"?\textsuperscript{152} Steel continued: "The pragmatism that allowed him to approach each event with an open mind sometimes prevented him from perceiving a wider pattern."

As one who had stringently argued the dangers of totalitarianism throughout the 1930's, Lippmann had no illusions about the expansionist nature of the Soviet system. Lippmann's hand in constructing the theory of totalitarian also ironically helped to build the grounds by which subsequent administrations would

\textsuperscript{151} Ronald Steel, \textit{Walter Lippmann and the American Century}, p. 470.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid, 487, 490.
support containment -- specifically that Stalin was identical to Hitler in his ideology, imperialism, and dogmatism, and therefore impossible to negotiate with, and that Russia in essence represented a moral threat to the United States and must be portrayed to the public as such.

This view, however, had always been tempered by Lippmann's conviction that the failures of the Western democracy must share part of the blame for Stalinism. That was precisely where Lippmann took issue with Kennan -- he denied the implications of Kennan's position that the United States would continue to grow more powerful and Russia would eventually fall apart. While Kennan correctly predicted that the Soviet Union contained the seeds of its own demise, Lippmann rightly argued that a strategy of unlimited and permanent mobilization would sap the country's economic resources, lead to a disintegration of its war making powers and open the floodgates for the imperial presidency. 153

Lippmann's position eschewed the demonization of Russia. In the early years of the Cold War, Lippmann understood that the Soviets were acting in accordance to their own security interests by keeping a foothold in Eastern Europe. Soviet stationed troops in East Berlin reflected a legitimate fear of German imperialism rather than some fanatical interest in world domination. For Lippmann, the danger with the Soviets was primarily a strategic one and lay in the hands of the United States -- should the United States pursue disarmament and maximize the possibilities of accommodation, or follow a strategy of containment that might lead Russia to consider that a Western conspiracy, run through NATO and the United Nations, aimed to destroy Soviet hegemony? Such a strategy,

thought Lippmann, risked that the Russians would respond fearfully and retaliate in defense.

Niebuhr's foreign policy, like Lippmann's, stressed that the survival of Western democracy required a knowledge of America's own pretensions and fragility. This meant treating Russia as "human" and not demonic. Niebuhr's interpretation of American policy during the Cold War can be summed in one sentence: America's commitment to, and celebration of, progress -- technical, economic, and strategic -- hid the reality of evil at home and abroad. The atomic bomb, for Niebuhr, was the first irony of the post-war era. It symbolized America's technical achievement and faith in progress, but obscured the irresponsibility unleashed by its devastation of the Japanese population. The United States was the first to land a man on the moon, while the poverty and lack of social reform in the inner cities went unexamined. President Nixon's statement seemed flawed in its own pretensions: "Any culture which can put a man on the moon is capable of gathering all the nations of the earth in peace, justice, and concord." 154

Niebuhr's interpretation of the Soviet Union underwent sharp changes from the end of the war to the mid-1950's. His belief before the war had always been that the Soviets were not morally nihilistic as the Nazis. He stressed that "firmness and patience" on the part of the United States would allay Russian fears and prevent a third world war.

Yet Niebuhr also saw Communism more dangerous than Nazism because it had appeared less heinous to some liberal intellectuals. He accepted the

administration's expansionist view of Russia -- that the Soviets were intent on controlling Eastern Europe and eventually all of Europe. Stalin, much like Hitler, had tried to intimidate the U.S. into a series of concessions. In March, 1947, Niebuhr traveled through Europe and kept close contact with continental Socialists and democrats who feared a Soviet invasion. For Niebuhr, Truman's proposal to send 400 million in emergency military aid to Turkey and Greece was essential to protecting that region against local, Soviet-assisted, Communist movements.

Similarly with the Marshall Plan, Niebuhr lent his hearty approval. Communism was sure to take root in Europe, he thought, if the continent's finances dried up. Niebuhr fell within the ranks of Third Force anti-Communism, a position that accepted the division of the world into spheres of influence. Russia could lay a legitimate claim on Eastern Europe, but must at all costs be kept out of Germany and France. When the Soviets blockaded East Berlin from the West in the summer of 1948, Niebuhr supported devoting the majority of U.S. resources to the European theater. China was not central to America's national interest and thus Niebuhr urged the State Department not to support Chiang Kai-shek. To invest too much time in Asia would weaken U.S. defenses against Communism in Europe -- the theater of the most vital importance.

Niebuhr served as a consultant on Kennan's policy planning staff and shared Kennan's conviction in 1948 that Soviet Communism was dying. Communism, he maintained, must be strongly opposed in Berlin; pro-Wallace supporters were nothing more than Communist dupes and the Progressive Party was overrun with Communist line toters. Their popular front brand of liberalism could not stand up to the challenges of the Cold War. But Niebuhr teetered on forming a consistent policy on Asia. He argued both that China was not within
America's national interest, and that the Soviets were intent on invading Europe and therefore the U.S. must protect future soft spots like Korea.

Although Niebuhr's outlook aligned with the realism of Kennan's later career, he was more skeptical than Lippmann about accepting too much of the reality of power politics and shaping policy in full accordance with the national interest. An effective American foreign policy, thought Niebuhr, steered a course between realism and idealism, between egoism and moralism. America must keep its sense of a world community if it had any hope of avoid another world war. For this reason, Niebuhr saw the primary significance of NATO, created in the spring of 1949, as a symbolic uniting moral force in Europe; it's strategic value, he thought, was secondary.

If Niebuhr more than Lippmann followed the administration's line, his ironic perspective insulated him from the "terrors of ideology" as historian Marian Morton characterized it. Richard Wightman Fox argued that Niebuhr's debate with theologian Karl Barth over America's proper response to evil led him to apply the concept of irony to politics and foreign affairs. Where Barth had stressed a Christian's "final hope" of victory over evil and the value of Christian hope and faith, Niebuhr favored small, incremental advances over social injustice and stressed that America must de-emphasize God's final triumph over evil. This demonstrated Niebuhr's continuing faith in pragmatism. As Fox summarized, "Niebuhr was urging a pluralistic, shifting Christian prophesy that tailored its judgment to circumstances. God went beyond history, but the Christian witness was profoundly shaped by it." Fox argued that it was Barth who made Niebuhr "freshly aware of the complexity of the American reality...one had to avoid pretension...in order to understand the mix of pretension and achievement in the
American past. By hitting on the concept of irony, [Niebuhr] was able to incorporate a principle of self-criticism into his own argument.”

Both Lippmann and Niebuhr became staunch opponents of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, arguing that the Vietnam conflict fully exposed the heights of America's moral pretensions. Neither thought the Asian theater central to America's vital interests. Lippmann maintained that American foreign policy was much too driven by ideology. Had policy makers in the Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations tested theories and waited for results, had they been more willing to operate outside a preconceived notion of the Soviet Union as an imperialistic nation bent on world domination, they might have adverted needless conflict. Lippmann maintained that the country would have found some degree of insight and self-reflection to pull itself out of a quagmire, one that was worsened by its own national pride and self-righteousness.

During the early years of the Indochina War, Lippmann favored the neutralization of Vietnam and a negotiated peace. The Kennedy administration, however, feared that this policy would hand Vietnam over to the Chinese, and another domino in the world would tumble to Communism. How could anyone be sure that the Chinese would not take advantage of a negotiated settlement in Vietnam? Lippmann argued that the North Vietnamese weren't puppets of a gigantic Communist empire spanning the globe. So all the United States had to lose was a country divided artificially by ideology into two zones. Even if the Viet Cong succeeded in unifying the country, they would not necessarily conspire with the Chinese. Lippmann argued it was a gamble the United States must take.

---

because there was no other alternative. The administration in 1965, thought Lippmann, had no clear goal for winning the war, only to hold off the North Vietnamese indefinitely. President Johnson and his advisors argued that American and South Vietnamese ground forces combined with American air power was successfully breaking the will of the Viet Cong. Lippmann and disaffected officials of Johnson's cabinet heard reports to the contrary from journalists in Vietnam. Lippmann was so convinced of the flawed ideological premises of the administration's Vietnam policy that he became obsessed with criticizing the war in his columns and wrote about little else after 1965. He lost many old friends over his criticism of the administration's policy and in the end drew the venom of President Johnson.

Niebuhr's foreign policy more than Lippmann's during the 1960's focused on the demonic pretensions of the utopianism imbedded in the Marxist ideology of the Soviets: "If not resisted," warned Niebuhr, "these unchallenged pretensions will grow. If resisted, the opportunity is given for the common experience of history to dissolve and refute pretentious dogmas that have prematurely dug channels for historic vitalities...Our modern task is to escape the hell of mutual annihilation while exorcising the false heaven of the utopian creeds. Fortunately, the two tasks are not as incompatible as they seem."156

Though Niebuhr believed a responsible anti-Communism included the deterrence of a Soviet missile build-up, he stressed that American's defense would be hindered by any polemic view of Russia, one that attributed all evil to the Soviet empire. The United States and Russia needed each other "as partners in saving

---

mankind from catastrophe." A show of American force in order to deter the Soviets was an effective short-term policy but not a solution to the Cold War. Niebuhr believed it reflected "a primitive anti-communism" explicit in its extreme form in the policies of Barry Goldwater.

Like Lippmann, Niebuhr since the 1950's had warned against American involvement in Vietnam. He saw Ngo Dinh Diem's government as corrupt with little to no support among the military and South Vietnamese peasant population. In 1964, Niebuhr supported a limited U.S. commitment to assist the Saigon government with economic aid and military advisors. But he strongly opposed extending the war to North Vietnam. "In the end, we must debate and decide about the conflicting demands of prestige and strategy in a part of the world in which our form of government is not immediately viable and also not obviously imperiled." In February, 1965, President Johnson began the Rolling Thunder aerial bombardment of North Vietnam. Niebuhr responded, "We are clearly bogged down in a war which neither side can win." 157

Niebuhr joined Lippmann, William J. Fulbright in the Senate, and Hans Morgenthau of the University of Chicago, in sharply criticizing President Johnson's Vietnam policy, questioning whether prestige should outweigh strategy. Like Lippmann, Niebuhr focused on the ominous moral implications of the war and argued that Vietnam was not vital to the non-Communist cause; Ho Chi Minh was not a threat to world peace as Hitler or Stalin had been. The idea of an "international Communist conspiracy" ignored the Russia-China rift and Russia as an implicit partner with the United States for nuclear peace.

When Johnson escalated the war on August 3, 1967, upping the total number of U.S. ground forces in Vietnam to 525,000 by June 1968, Niebuhr voiced his strong opposition to the decision. He identified the pride and prestige of American imperialism as the primary motivating force for the country's engagement in Vietnam; anti-Communism must be a minor motivating force for policy makers at this point, he thought, since the administration's policy did not correspond with the facts. Niebuhr called America's own justification for its presence in Vietnam "an illusion of American omnipotence" rather than a moral mandate to oppose and end tyranny, as it had been during the World War II.

Responding to the errors made in Vietnam and the ideological pretenses of America's foreign policy during the Cold War, Lippmann and Niebuhr engaged in a pragmatic realism. They maintained that the United States must be flexible in responding to the contingencies of international affairs. To the extent that their foreign policy was pragmatic, it never accepted the naturalistic premises of Dewey's philosophy. Niebuhr's criticism of Dewey at the outset of World War II was equally applicable to America's faith in progress and its unconsciousness of evil during the Cold War: "The worst injustices and conflicts of history arise from these very claims of impartiality for biased and partial historical instruments. The solution at which Professor Dewey arrives is therefore an incredibly naive answer to a much more ultimate and perplexing problem than he realizes. It could only have risen in a period of comparative social stability and security and in a nation in which geographic isolation obscured the conflict of nations, and great wealth mitigated the social conflict within a nation." 158

---

The conviction that America's consciousness of evil could be elevated by a sense of irony and tragedy was one of Niebuhr's essential contributions to post-war intellectual climate. Niebuhr stressed that only by evoking the imagination could one transcend the limits of self-interest and fulfill a common commitment to humanity. This entailed a challenge to the naturalistic premises of the Enlightenment -- premises flawed by the natural human inclination to believe that human beings have more control over nature than he really do.

Niebuhr's *Irony of American History* built on his insight from *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, that history is made tragic by the contradictory nature of human beings, and that we are all responsible for the sins we commit inevitably.

Yet *Irony* also carried a hopeful message for the Cold War and after, one that defies the nihilism of today's postmodernist scholarship. Niebuhr argued forcefully that we are not simply victims of history because we are its creators. Not only do human beings have the power to take moral responsibility for their actions, each has the capacity for self-reflection and self-criticism. The knowledge that human action often stood as a direct and unintended result of human intention offered such a possibility. Thus, Niebuhr's concept of irony offers an awareness of our pretensions in a way that the idea of progress could not. It illuminates a faith in a liberal democracy's capacity for justice that postmodernism denies.

Lippmann, always pessimistic, yet hopeful about the direction of human affairs, held that human creativity was best served under a transcendent system. This belief is especially evident in two of his later works, both which characterize the conservative turn in his thought. The central message of *Preface to Morals*

---

was that the foundations of authority can be reestablished under modern conditions, and human beings as rational creatures do have the potential to overcome social conflict. Twenty six years later, Lippmann ended *The Public Philosophy* on the same note:

> It may be possible to alter the terms of discourse if a convincing demonstration can be made that the principles of the good society are not, in Sartre's phrase, invented and chosen -- that the conditions which must be met if there is to be a good society are there, outside our wishes, where they can be discovered by rational inquiry, and developed and adapted and refined by rational discussion.  

If Lippmann in *The Public Philosophy* was more skeptical than he had ever been about the moral wisdom and governing capabilities of the people, he remained hopeful about the potential of democracy. His book was not a jeremiad. Rather, it aimed to revive the objective standard and moral wisdom of the public philosophy, a "common faith" that could arbitrate between contending factions in the public arena. As historian Joel Rosenthal suggested, *The Public Philosophy* stands as a response to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center* (1949) -- its call to defend against totalitarianism by giving individuals a "sense of belonging" and to "restore community to the political order."

Lippmann shared this ideal not only with Niebuhr, but also John Dewey and the neopragmatists of today.  

---


American experience, which suggested the limits of human action. As Niebuhr put it, "History was not a progressive march interrupted by temporary set backs, but a drama of human weakness and strength."\textsuperscript{162}

Bibliography

Primary Sources


______________. "Today and Tomorrow," (June 15, 1940).

______________. "Today and Tomorrow," (November 6, 1937).

______________. "Today and Tomorrow," (October 15, 1938).

______________. "Today and Tomorrow," (October 30, 1941).

______________. “Today and Tomorrow,” (December 12, 1939).


______________. "Jews After the War," Nation, 154, nos 8 and 9 (February 21 and 28, 1942), pp. 214-216, 253-255.


______________. "The Race Problem," Christianity and Society, 7, no. 3 (Summer, 1942), pp. 3-5.


___________. Christianity and Power Politics (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940).

___________. Christianity and Society, vol. 5 no. 4 (Fall, 1940), pp. 2-3.


_____________. "Germany Must Be Told!" Christian Century 50 no 32 (August 9, 1933), p. 1014.


Secondary Works


Morton, Marian J. The Terrors of Ideological Politics (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve University, 1972).


__________. Noble Abstractions: American Liberal Intellectuals and World War II (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1999).


