THE MORALITY, POLITICS, AND IRONY OF WAR

Recovering Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethical Realism

John D. Carlson

ABSTRACT

The American experience of war is ironic. That is, there is often an intimate and unexamined relationship between seemingly contrary elements in war such as morality and politics. This article argues that without understanding such irony, we are unlikely to reflect in morally comprehensive ways on past, present, or future wars. Traditional schools of thought, however, such as moralism and political realism, reinforce these apparent contradictions. I propose, then, an alternative—"ethical realism" as informed by Reinhold Niebuhr—that better explains the irony of war. Through an ethical realist examination of the U.S. Civil War, World War II, and the Iraq War, I consider how American political interests have been inextricably linked with deep moral concerns. Ethical realism charts a middle path that ennobles traditional *realpolitik* while eschewing certain perfectionist tendencies of moralism. Ethical realism provides a conceptual framework for evaluating these other frameworks—a distinct form of moral-political deliberation about war.

KEY WORDS: *Reinhold Niebuhr*, *ethical realism*, *moralism*, *just war*, *U.S. Civil War*, *World War II*, *Iraq War*

IN HIS ATTENTIVELY DETAILED CHRONICLE of the invasion of Iraq, George Packer muses,

> Why did the United States invade Iraq? It still isn't possible to be sure—and this remains the most remarkable thing about the Iraq War. . . . It was something that some people wanted to do. Before the invasion, Americans argued not just about whether a war should happen, but for what reasons it should happen—what the real motives of the Bush administration were and should be. Since the invasion, we have continued to argue, and we will go on arguing for years to come. Iraq is the *Rashomon* of wars [2005, 46].

Many put forward strategic and political reasons for the war. Others offered moral and humanitarian arguments. Thwarting terrorism, enforcing UN resolutions, spreading democracy, liberating the

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oppressed, defending human rights, securing oil—all were heard in the prelude to war. Evoking the 1950 Kurosawa film, Packer suggests it is impossible to agree upon the true reason or motives for the invasion. It depends upon the eyes through which the story is told.

Why and how nations go to war matters crucially from a moral point of view. Yet the morality of war also encompasses concerns broader than the *jus ad bellum* criteria justifying the resort to war or *jus in bello* constraints on war's conduct. In some cases, a war's moral legacy may outshine—even contrast starkly with—the political reasons for war or its conduct. Such has been a recurring irony in the American experience of war. However, if irony presupposes a relationship between seemingly contrary elements, then war's moral legacies are not merely accidental but intimately related to the political causes. The morality and politics of war are bound up together.[1]

Dominant conceptual approaches to war presuppose or reinforce the apparent incongruities by severing morality and politics too sharply. Classical political realism views force as the extension of politics by other means: an instrument of state power. Moral judgments, if considered at all, primarily serve as window dressing. In contrast, idealists or moralists, motivated by good will, set moral principles over and against political interests and other factors that realists accept as perduring limitations of politics. Neither approach explains the irony of war and the underlying moral-political connections. Consequently, neither provides an adequate conceptual account of ethics, statecraft, and war: political realists ignore certain ethical realties and possibilities much as moralists ignore certain political realities and limitations.

This essay considers an alternative framework for interpreting the irony of war: a middle path between moralism and realism as influenced by the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. "Ethical realism" is the term I assign to this Niebuhrian approach to war that locates moral concerns centrally within a framework that sees politics as it is, not as one hopes it would be.[2] Niebuhr appreciated the delicate tension that holds ethics and politics together—always wary of those who claimed either at the expense of the other. In our politically divisive times, some

[1] Some rightly will wonder whether moral and political dimensions of war such as freedom, order, and security can or should be separated. Yet, there are also moral cases in which clear U.S. political interests are wanting (think Rwanda or Kosovo). This essay considers "morality" through a humanitarian lens of concern for the lives, liberty, and dignity of non-U.S. citizens. War that helps end human suffering, liberate oppressed peoples, or thwart egregious injustices forms the "moral" dimension I explore here as it conflicts or intersects with war's political dimensions.

[2] For a full treatment of Niebuhr's Christian realism—the term he used for a complex conglomeration of various types of political, theological, and moral realism—see Lovin 1995.

seek to reclaim this ethico-political balance (Lieven and Hulsman 2006), and Niebuhr remains a pivotal figure for this enterprise given his influence on both the political left (Beinart 2006; Schlesinger 2005) and right (Brooks 2002; Loconte 2002).

Ethical realism considers how American political interests often are inextricably linked to deep moral concerns that are neither accidental nor incidental. *The argument is that without an understanding of the irony of American war, we are unlikely to recall past wars in morally sophisticated ways or to exhaust the full range of moral deliberation in undertaking present or future wars. This appraisal of irony provides an ethico-historical backdrop that helps us assess the panoply of moral and political stakes in the decision to use or forgo force*. I begin by exploring the irony of America's historical experience of war and the seeming misalignment between certain root political causes of war and our moral and cultural memory of them. Ethical realism transcends this moral-political dualism by enlarging the moral universe of war. I then take up contrasting moralist and realist perspectives in pre-war deliberation to the Iraq invasion of 2003. Here, ethical realism reveals and corrects moralism's shortcomings. Through attention to irony—including its moral ambivalence—I explore how ethical realism provides an illuminating, albeit imperfect, framework for engaging and evaluating a variety of moral and political perspectives on past and present U.S. wars. Rather than supplying a prescribed set of ethical principles as found in just war theory, ethical realism furnishes a meta-ethical approach to war: a framework for making judgments about moral-political judgments.[3]

1. Moral Memories and Political Realities

One irony of American war involves the incongruity between how wars often are morally remembered and the political circumstances that precipitate them. Ethical realism invites us to view how such moral memories and political causes, nonetheless, are related. Memory, as the early ethical realist Augustine understood, is a crucial means of teaching the truth to others. We know, however, that memory—including the remembrance of war—is selective as it strives for coherence. We generalize and simplify to cull the moral lessons of war: lessons enshrined by the victors, by the force of their military might or the persistence of their values.

While we accept the political aim of the U.S. Civil War to stamp out secession (which surely has ethical dimensions), the war's greatest

[3] On whether Niebuhr offers the resources for a discrete theory or tradition of war and peace, see Carlson 2008b.

moral legacy is the demise of slavery (McKenna 2007, 29). Abraham Lincoln is oft remembered as "the great emancipator," beatified for his courage in branding American slavery "a monstrous injustice." His 1863 Gettysburg Address gestures to the eternal yet unrealized promise of the Declaration of Independence and speaks movingly of "the proposition that all men are created equal." His Second Inaugural two years later declared that slavery was "somehow" the cause of the horrific and bloody war. However, if the cause of that war would cease even before the war ended, as Lincoln asseverated, was slavery really the cause? Lincoln's deeds, we will see, seem to vitiate this idea—and so do his words:

> My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union . . . [not] to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave, I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone, I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union. . . . I have here stated my purpose according to my official duty . . . [not] my oft-expressed personal wish that all men everywhere could be free [Stout 2003, 33–34].

Such a pronouncement decouples Lincoln's political duty from his personal moral convictions. It highlights his realism, suggesting, as some historians claim, that the decision to deliver the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 was primarily an issuance of total war against the South. Applied only to slavery in the rebel states (not to all slave-holding territories), the decree ratcheted up the moral rhetoric of war and political support for its escalation (Stout 2003, 34), it depleted the Confederate adversary of numerous reserve recruits, and it enhanced the Union cause abroad.

In his aversion to slavery, Lincoln resisted the moralistic fervor of nineteenth-century abolitionism, nurtured by the evangelicalism and revivalism of the Second Great Awakening. Morally courageous abolitionists distinguished themselves from those northern unionists who, despite their personal contempt for slavery, accommodated it, profited from it, and even feared its end. For many abolitionists, there were only two tenable choices: abolish slavery or let the South secede. Nonetheless, with their rallying cry, "If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off," they isolated themselves from the actual economic and political forces that would help end this mighty scourge throughout *all* the territories.[4] In the end, then, it was not abolitionists' moral indignation

[4] On slavery, abolitionist views of war, and the events that consolidated the Union cause, see Menand 2001, 3–69.

that ended slavery but a war governed by shrewd resistance to moralistic tendencies.[5] Political savvy ironically yielded a moral legacy that overshadowed effete moralism.

Nor did Lincoln reliably support prominent African-Americans' efforts to use the war to promote racial equality. Historian David Blight, describing Lincoln's gracious yet ambiguous relationship to Frederick Douglass, displays how far apart the two men stood at times. Prior to the Emancipation, Douglass denounced Lincoln's policy of returning refugee slaves to their owners and his plans to re-colonize freed slaves. In oration and in print, Douglass referred to Lincoln as "the most dangerous advocate of slave-hunting and slave-catching in the land"; as "an itinerant colonization lecturer"; and as a "genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred" (Blight 2003). That Lincoln distanced himself starkly from fiery abolitionists and defenders of Negro equality seems to lift any moralist veneer to reveal that, underneath, the great liberator was a pragmatic statesman. As Harry Stout affirms, Lincoln "eventually turned emancipationist largely as a 'war measure' to promote a Northern victory" (Stout 2003, 16).

Lincoln, of course, loathed slavery even if he did not display the same indignation or embrace the tactics of his moralist contemporaries. Niebuhr, a great admirer of Lincoln (who incidentally hailed from Lincoln, Illinois), discussed this willingness to save the union as "half slave and half free" and put the interests of the state over the interests of oppressed human beings. Moreover, Niebuhr understood well that Lincoln was no run of the mill realist. He extolled Lincoln for appreciating the intimate relationship between moral and political values and for recognizing that ultimately "[t]he union could be saved only by abolishing slavery. This is a nice symbol of the fact that

[5] Consider this vignette taken from Stephen Oates's biography of Lincoln. Following a devastating Union defeat in Missouri, General Fremont, an abolitionist and Lincoln rival, issued an edict declaring freemen of *all* slaves in Missouri (rather than limiting the scope to those enlisted in the war effort). Lincoln immediately perceived the threat that even such a localized proclamation would pose to the Union cause, particularly among Union supporters in the Border States. Backed by abolitionists in the East who cheered Fremont's decision, the emboldened general opted to force a confrontation with the President. Fremont sent his wife as an emissary to the White House, whereupon Lincoln rebuffed Mrs. Fremont, telling her, "This was a war for a great national idea, the Union, and . . . General Fremont should not have dragged the negro into it." In symbolic defiance, Fremont, qua moralist-abolitionist, had backed Lincoln into a corner. He asked—indeed demanded—that Lincoln publicly denounce Fremont's act. Lincoln had no choice, and, to the chagrin of many abolitionists, he ordered Fremont to "revise the slave provision," in essence rescinding the emancipated status of the slaves Fremont had declared free. This was a personal, moral, and political defeat for Lincoln who sought the favor of the North, but it was a lesser political defeat, he believed, than allowing Fremont's proclamation to stand, which would have risked alienating the Border States (Oates 1977, 260–61).

order precedes justice in the strategy of government; but that only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace. An unjust order quickly invites the resentment and rebellion which lead to its undoing" (1944, 181). Niebuhr's ethical realism underscores the necessity of holding political strategies and moral principles in tension, of mutually locating the limits of one within the fulfillment of the other. Lincoln understood it was necessary to adopt morally imperfect political strategies in order to achieve a broader moral *and* political agenda. This embrace of irony tolerates certain moral compromises to achieve what some would disparage as narrowly "political" gains. Nonetheless, Niebuhr gleaned that Lincoln "saved" the union at multiple levels: ending slavery was not only politically necessary to preserve the union; a fortiori, only the abolition of slavery could make the union worthy of saving. Such an approach urges us to locate pursuits that seem to stray from righteous paths with respect to a larger moral-political compass.

Ethical realism also provides a nuanced framework for considering U.S. entry and action in World War II. In discussing the morality of that war, we should not dismiss the many legitimate declared war aims: to defend the nation following direct attack; to thwart menaces to U.S. interests; and to counter aggressive fascist regimes conquering other nations. There are clear moral stakes in these political causes for war. In the clarity of hindsight, though, we can see that ending Hitler's odious campaign to exterminate the Jewish race was among the most significant moral legacies. With the same clarity, we also can discern the rather insignificant role these Nazi atrocities occupied in the American war effort.

The sprawling literature on the relationship of the Allied war effort to the "Jewish question" unveils deep reluctance to insinuate the Jewish genocide in military strategy. President Roosevelt was tuned in to Hitler's genocidal scheme by 1942, but notwithstanding certain efforts to mitigate the Jewish tragedy, officials across the administration (including the President himself) resisted integrating the Holocaust into the Allied cause. The charge of anti-Semitism provides only limited insight into this resistance, since the main reasons for relegating the Jewish question to the margins were political and strategic in nature. At base, these leaders believed that extending the Allied cause to rescuing European Jews would impede military victory. Secretary of State Cordell Hull and Undersecretary Breckinridge Long actively obstructed "the flow of money, information, and passports that might save Jews from Hitler" (Beschloss 2002, 53). War Department Secretary Henry Stimson and Undersecretary John McCloy insisted that efforts to employ military forces to provide succor to Jews in, or bound for, concentration camps would siphon off resources essential to achieving victory against the Nazis. General Eisenhower simply dubbed the

whole problem of Jewish refugees "a damned nuisance" (Beschloss 2002, 54). These figures united behind Roosevelt who offered the consummate consolation: to end the Jewish plight, one must win the war. Henry Feingold explains, the administration feared that

> making the fate of Europe's Jews central to the Allied war effort, as Berlin had done, would interfere with the mobilization of the requisite passion in the public mind to defeat the enemy and absorb the loss of lives that it required. It is not that Allied leaders were anti-Semitic, as some would claim; they were probably less so than the general public. . . . But to allow German propaganda to make points by arguing that it was a Jewish war and that Allied soldiers were being asked to sacrifice their lives to save the Jews might have had a deleterious impact on the Allied war effort. Instead, the Jewish aspect of the war was fudged [2000, 198].

Like Lincoln before him, Roosevelt took note of the moral stakes of war (here pertaining to the Jewish question) and set them aside for fear of jeopardizing needed support at home and with key allies. Roosevelt's administration saw the slaughter of innocent Jews as one of many Nazi horrors that an Allied victory would end, but slowing the genocide would not win the war.

Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., however, was morally outraged not only at the Jewish genocide but at American foot-dragging and obstructionism to efforts to end it. Morgenthau, a secular Jew, likely recalled a similar dilemma from World War I when his father, as U.S. Ambassador to Turkey, was learning of the massacre of one million Armenians. The elder Morgenthau had been similarly incensed and spoke out, as his son later would do, "on behalf of humanity."[6] The Morgenthaus' religion was irrelevant to their outrage. So were the victims' ethnicities. The Morgenthaus spoke as humanists, as citizens of the world, and as Americans (Beschloss 2002, 46). Going against the grain, both men were frustrated by the political constraints that limited taking further action to ease human suffering.

Circumventing Hull, Morgenthau personally urged Roosevelt to establish the War Refugee Board. Created in January 1944, the Board

[6] When Morgenthau Sr. broached the topic of the Armenian genocide, Turkish interior minister Mehmed Talaat asked incredulously, "Why are you so interested in the Armenians anyway? You are a Jew, these people are Christians. . . . Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?" Morgenthau retorted, "You don't seem to realize that I am not here as a Jew but as the American Ambassador. . . . I do not appeal to you in the name of any race or religion but merely as a human being." Morgenthau later urged President Wilson to intervene diplomatically. However, because the Armenian atrocities took place prior to U.S. entry into World War I, Wilson demurred (Power 2002, 7).

belatedly provided safe haven to some 200,000 Jews. (Critics accused FDR of placating the Jewish vote on which he would depend later that fall.) In March, two years after learning of Hitler's iniquitous scheme—and again upon Morgenthau's insistent urging—Roosevelt finally acknowledged publicly the Final Solution: "the wholesale, systematic murder of the Jews." He issued a passionate plea to the world to provide succor to these victims of "crimes against humanity" (Beschloss 2002, 59). However, this well-calculated indignation emerged within a context that sought to win the war. To wit, he first cleared the statement with Churchill and Stalin.[7]

Then there is the proposal to bomb Auschwitz, a plan supported at the time by Jewish leaders such as Jacob Rosenheim. Some still claim that the Allies should have bombed the concentration camps (see Wyman 1985; Lammers 1998). Undersecretary McCloy was long accused of shelving and shielding from the President such a plan that might have forestalled the Jewish genocide, but sources recently made available show that McCloy personally briefed the President on the proposal in June 1944. Roosevelt reportedly thundered back:

> Why the idea! They'll say we bombed these people, and they'll only move [the concentration camp] down the road a little way and [we'll] bomb them all the more. If it's successful, it'll be more provocative, and I won't have anything to do [with it]. . . . We'll be accused of participating in this horrible business [Beschloss 2002, 86].

FDR viewed the rescue plan as impractical and contrary to the war's aims. In Lincoln's language, it was inconsistent with his "official duty" to win the war—no matter his "personal wish" or concern about the fate of European Jews. This account offers little solace to those who view the morality of World War II through the monocle of the Jewish plight. It does not assure us that Roosevelt did all he could. Nonetheless, it is a cautionary tale against channeling the moral dimensions of war too narrowly, too reductively. For the moral issues of World War II were much broader than—yet intricately wrapped around—the Jewish question. Niebuhr was clear about this in his early warnings about Germany's efforts to

> root out the Christian religion . . . it [Nazi Germany] defies all the universal standards of justice . . . it threatens the Jewish race with annihilation and visits a maniacal fury upon these unhappy people . . . it

[7] Roosevelt even briefly entertained the idea of negotiating secretly with famed Nazi henchman Adolf Eichmann who offered to save the lives of a million Jews in exchange for military assets. Suspecting Eichmann was trying to divide the alliance, FDR vetted the proposal with Stalin and Churchill who vetoed the plan (Beschloss 2002, 62–63).

> explicitly declares its intention of subjecting other races of Europe into slavery to the "master" race . . . it is already engaged in Poland and Czechoslovakia in destroying the very fabric of national existence . . . it is engaged in a terrible effort to establish an empire upon the very negation of justice . . . [1992, 274–75].

Such insight stems from a framework that refuses to distinguish morality cleanly from politics.

There are dangers, though, when the moral overwhelms the political. Even bold positions, such as Morgenthau's pressuring of Roosevelt to speak out and rescue oppressed Jews, can be prone to moralism. By the end of the war, Morgenthau's admirable concern for Europe's Jews seems to have lapsed into a form of moralistic monomania by which all other political decision making was measured. Gradually, fueled by a vindictiveness that other administration officials found insufferable, Morgenthau went so far that he lobbied Roosevelt to return post-war Germany to an agrarian society, deport millions of Germans from the United States, summarily execute Nazi leaders (an idea also championed by Stalin), and collectively punish the people of Germany: "The German people as a whole must have it driven home to them that the whole nation has been engaged in a lawless conspiracy against the decencies of modern civilization" (Bass 2000, 154). Sentiments and proposals such as these suggest that Morgenthau's deep moral regard for Jewish victims, at some point, crossed over into a severe retributive moralism. What began as a cosmopolitan humanism in which the victims' religion was irrelevant eventually gave way to what Secretary Stimson perceived (rightly or wrongly) as "Semitism gone wild for vengeance" (Bass 2000, 167). Moreover, Roosevelt associated this punitive spirit with the policies that ended World War I and fostered Hitler's rise. Such monomania to punish Germans for their evil government threatened Roosevelt's aspirations to end the war, achieve post-war reconciliation, rebuild Germany, and restore stability in Europe. Ultimately, he overrode many of Morgenthau's proposals that threatened these other moral-political goals.

The moral memory of war, formed selectively by limited features of historical consciousness, can be disturbed by knowledge of political realities that seem to tarnish war's noble luster. The disparity between political actions taken (or not taken) in war and war's later moral legacies suggests disturbing disjunctions. Niebuhr, nonetheless, apperceived that morality and politics overlap in ambiguous ways (1992, 273). Niebuhr's insights enabled him to anticipate the dangers of Nazism sooner, to articulate his position with greater strength, and to issue more accelerated calls to action than were taken by the U.S. administration, calling for use of force—war—to end the "intolerable tyranny" of Nazism a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

This ethical realist outlook helps us fathom not only the irony but also the tragedy of war. At a basic level, tragedy involves the rueful recognition that pursuing moral norms in politics often requires coercion and force. As such, Niebuhr objected strenuously to the pacifist moralism of his day, what he called the "unholy compound of gospel perfectionism and bourgeois utopianism." For all his polemics, Niebuhr did not doubt pacifists' good intentions. Rather, he saw the irony of how good will among children of light easily accommodates ignoble causes. Moralist refusal to accept the tragedy of war—to choose evil for the sake of good—does little to arrest the growth of tyranny and aggression (see Niebuhr 1992, 277).

At another level, the tragedy of war entails the incommensurability of competing moral and political goods. Pursuing one may require forsaking another. Niebuhr's ethical realist framework helps us sympathize with the practical difficulties of bombing the rail lines, situating such strategic decisions within the ambit of tragedy and the effort to win a war. Ethical realism alerts us to the irony of moral monomania in which the pursuit of a singular moral cause can jeopardize a much broader complex of moral-political problems. Ethical realism chastens us by drawing our attention to the limits of human action, politics, and war. Without fully consoling us, it offers some solace that, amidst the strategic calculations of World War II, Jewish persecution garnered debate and consideration—even if, as many claim, more should have been done.

More recent U.S. examples also suggest a disparity between the moral legacies and political realities of war. A likely legacy of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan will be the liberation of the Afghan people from an authoritarian theocracy. Children's textbooks one day may recount the Taliban's horrid treatment of its citizens (women especially), the reign of fear over which it presided, its destruction of great religious monuments, and its brutal enforcement of religious practices. Any who wonder, however, why no military action was taken earlier against this internal regime of terror can consult the views of four U.S. secretaries of defense and state in the Bill Clinton and George W. Bush administrations: there was no political justification, no national will, no *raison d'état* to overthrow the Taliban before al-Qaeda's attacks on September 11, 2001.

As well, Iraq War supporters have spared no effort to tout the war's moral achievements, reminding the world of the humanitarian horrors brought on by Saddam Hussein: genocide, ethnic cleansing, gross human rights violations, draconian political repression, torture, secret arrests and executions, and Iraq's use of chemical weapons against its neighbors and citizens. The administration's galvanizing argument before the war, though, was that Iraq's pursuit of weapons of mass

destruction (WMD) and potential ties to terrorism presented a grave and gathering threat warranting preemptive action (Bush 2002). On the face of it, national security and self-defense—classic realist ideas—drove this foreign policy decision. But in war's aftermath (especially when WMD were not found), the moral dimensions—liberating an oppressed people, ending the reign of a cruel dictator, bringing freedom and democracy to Iraq—took on greater emphasis.

The intent here is not to debunk moral legacies of U.S. wars but to show how irony pervades them and edifies our reflection upon them. The ethical realist interpretation I propose begins with the allure of moral-political dualism and "the ironic incongruity between our illusions and the realities we experience" (Niebuhr 1952, 24). This apparent contrast reveals certain provisional truths; where moral-humanitarian goals are at odds with political interests, nations make decisions and allocate resources that prioritize the latter, often at the expense of the former. However, once such decisions are made, war's moral standing can be elevated to the point of gilding our collective memory and over-inflating our historical consciousness. Niebuhr grasped the dangers here, admonishing that we are rarely as selfless as we perceive ourselves to be. The incongruity between our moral memories and the political realities of war provides humbling evidence of our limited virtue. "The irony of our situation," Niebuhr insists, "lies in the fact that we could not be virtuous (in the sense of practicing the virtues which are implicit in meeting our vast world responsibilities) if we were really as innocent as we pretend to be" (1952, 23). Such irony, he perceived, elicits contrition—not simply for the sake of repentance and moral correction but also to help us live up to our obligations. He sought to curb moralistic temptations that diminish U.S. responsibility in the world.[8]

Despite certain truths of classical realism and moralism, such moral-political dualism artificially detaches the political and ethical factors of war. Ethical realism overcomes this false dichotomy, revealing how the moral values in war are more complexly embedded than these prevailing discourses allow. War brings to light lurking, under-scrutinized ethical issues. Military victory tends to clarify them more fully. The moral-humanitarian causes we cherish often intricately enmesh the interests of states. Slavery had a direct bearing on

[8] Niebuhr elsewhere warns that we would "have a better chance of success in our struggle against a fanatical foe if we were less sure of our purity and virtue. The pride and self-righteousness of powerful nations are a greater hazard to their success in statecraft than the machinations of their foes" (1953, 30). These remarks spoke to the U.S. struggle against communism but, we will see, they also have currency for twenty-first-century threats as well.

secession. Nazism, which threatened U.S. and allied security, threatened the sheer existence of the Jewish race. Tyrannical regimes in Central Asia that inflicted atrocities against their own people threatened other states and geopolitical stability, too.[9] The moral pursuit of justice presupposes political order, but such order cannot safely endure the presence of injustice. What begins as a political *casus belli* may turn out by war's end to be a supremely noble and worthy moral cause. The political elicits or gives way to the moral. This is not simply paradox, the simultaneous truth of contrary elements, but the irony of one element giving way to its perceived opposite. Niebuhr did not discuss this moral valence of irony—that irony could conceal profounder relationships worthy of embrace. Nonetheless, out of this Niebuhrian-grounded ethic, we see how, in many American wars, moral realities underlie political interests and how political limits circumscribe moral concerns.

Ethical realism's attention to irony provides a historical context for interpreting past wars. Moral memory, though, is no substitute for moral reason when reflecting on present or future wars. One cannot argue retrospectively from moral outcomes to justifiable causes; the reasons we go to war are still of paramount moral concern. Ethical realism also can help us discern how moral and political values are enmeshed in pre-war deliberation, a matter to which we now turn.

2. Moralism and the Iraq War: An Ethical Realist Critique

This section presents an ethical realist framework for assessing arguments for and against war by examining the moral-political deliberation preceding the 2003 invasion of Iraq.[10] I offer a Niebuhrian-inspired analysis, not Niebuhr's would-be views on the matter, which we cannot know for sure. We will see that the ennobling irony of war discussed above can be offset by the worrisome irony of moralism. Moralism has been a recurrent feature of American reflection on war.

[9] Perhaps in the future, some will argue that North Korea's human rights violations against its own citizens are as serious as the threats its nuclear program poses to other nations (see Havel et al. 2006).

[10] Some may object that violence, chaos, and civil strife in Iraq following the invasion obviate any effort to revisit pre-war deliberation. Whether one supported or opposed the invasion, the Iraq War was not foreordained to fail. Much of the failure has been due to deficient reasoning and decision making prior to the invasion as well as poor preparation in planning for and managing the occupation. Both failures involved choices; neither was inevitable. This article seeks to explain the context that facilitated those failures. I proceed with the assumption that a different form of moral-political deliberation before the war, coupled with more assiduous planning and wiser administration of the occupation, might have produced quite different outcomes.

By taking narrow or rigidly principled stances—for or against war—moralists can undercut the admirable causes and humane values to which they are so devoutly committed. When virtue becomes vice, such irony is surely lamentable. Ethical realism provides a mode of evaluating moral reflection—to identify, temper, and refine perfectionist tendencies by fostering a more concerted engagement with political reason, limits, and realties. Ethical realism assesses the limits of moral analysis, without endorsing the moral disinterest of classical realism. Transcending these approaches, ethical realism engages the interests of states and the limits of politics in order to bring about a more prolific moral agenda.

2.1 *Just war rigorism*

From 2002 to 2003, "just war" reflection was exercised widely by a host of voices assessing the moral justifiability of war against Iraq. Some came out in favor of the war, others against it. Many who initially opposed the war in just war terms grounded their critique in a rigorous and casuistic interpretation of just war (Childress 2003; Singer 2003; and Carter 2003). Others who construe just war as a moral theory of statecraft offered a more permissive reading of the tradition; they generally considered the invasion of Iraq morally justifiable (Elshtain 2002; Johnson 2005a; and Weigel 2003). Neither position is without its problems.[11] I consider here one rigorist position that, in opposing the Iraq War, ironically undercut some of its central moral claims, falling prey to a common moralist temptation. Because ethical realism shares with just war a commitment to the moral use of force, it provides a corrective to just war moralism.

In their 2002 "Statement on Iraq," the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) appealed to the just war tradition to oppose the impending invasion (USCCB 2002). Though it was a Catholic statement of conviction, consistent with the Pope's position, the bishops' statement was endorsed widely by many other denominations and religious leaders (NCCUSA 2002). The bishops' statement begins by recognizing the quite real threats that Saddam Hussein's government posed to its own people and other nations but enjoins that "strict conditions" must be met to override "the strong presumption against

[11] Just war schisms often are explained as differences between those who contend just war begins with a strong presumption *against* military intervention that is extremely difficult to override and those who believe just war's regard *for* justice cedes to states wider latitude to use force for moral ends (see Johnson 2005b). For more on this schism and a discussion of how Niebuhr informs current just war debates, see Carlson 2006 and 2008b.

the use of military force."[12] It concludes that "without clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature," military intervention would be unjustifiable. Rehearsing the criteria for a just war, the bishops deny that "preventive" use of force or regime change fits the nature of *just cause*. They go on to say that only the United Nations provides the appropriate form of *legitimate authority* for military action. Regarding *probability of success* and *proportionality*, the statement warns that war in Iraq could have "unpredictable consequences" including wider conflict and instability in Iraq and the Middle East. The bishops admit "that not taking military action could have its own consequences" but conclude that force cannot be supported. They propose such alternatives as "effective enforcement of the military embargo and maintenance of [targeted] political sanctions"; enforcement of biological and chemical weapons conventions; stronger non-proliferation measures worldwide; programs to eliminate WMD in all nations; and U.S. nuclear disarmament per the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Commendable in the bishops' statement is their deep moral concern for the well-being of Iraqi civilians. The bishops worry about the toll of thirteen years of economic sanctions on the civilian population. They also propose that war could threaten "terrible new burdens" and "incalculable costs." Had such proportional thinking formed the crux of this statement, it would have offered a more compelling rationale, given that some of the bishops' concerns were borne out. However, the statement's limitations flow out of the commitment to a restrictive interpretation of just war principles, which unduly curtail options for resolving conflict. Their narrow discussion of just cause entirely circumvents discussion of serious concerns—possession or pursuit of WMD, brutal repression, threatening behavior—that could warrant use of force. By making the UN Security Council the arbiter of legitimate authority, the statement effectively rules out any military action (including humanitarian intervention) not agreed to by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Interestingly, *last resort*, discussed extensively in *The Challenge of Peace*, receives no mention in the bishops' statement, though other just war critics rely on it.[13]

[12] This line recalls their 1983 pastoral letter, which speaks of "rigorous conditions" and "extraordinarily strong reasons" for war. See USCCB 1983, 217, pars. 86–110.

[13] See Carter 2003 and Singer 2003. Peter Steinfels observed before the war, "A good number of those invoking the just-war criterion of last resort are in reality absolute pacifists opposed to all use of armed force. Or they are what their critics call functional pacifists, not exactly avowing principled pacifism but just never encountering an American use of force they could not denounce" (2003).

What is most worrisome about the bishops' proposal is that their deep resistance to using force is ensued by scant practical advice or realistic alternatives for resolving the Iraq situation (despite the rather ambitious desire to eliminate WMD worldwide). In fact, they advocate lifting many economic sanctions, which actually would have eased pressure on Saddam Hussein's government. In short, the bishops' strong presumption against war prevents them from considering alternatives to sanctions that could require force (even something short of regime change). Ironically, just war rigorism's opposition to force undermined the bishops' exemplary moral commitment to ending economic sanctions.

To appreciate the moral force of the bishops' critique of sanctions, we need to back up to 1999 when, as U.S. Catholic Conference President, Joseph Fiorenza invoked just war principles to denounce economic sanctions against Iraq:

> The comprehensive sanctions against Iraq have long since ceased to be a morally acceptable tool of diplomacy, because they have inflicted indiscriminate and unacceptable suffering on the Iraqi people. They violate a fundamental principle of engagement in conflict—states may not seek to destroy a government or a military by targeting the innocent. It is incumbent on the United Nations Security Council and the United States, as the chief proponent of sanctions, to terminate promptly the economic embargo against Iraq [1999].

From a moral point of view, this seems entirely correct and consistent with *jus in bello* principles that require methods that seek to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. At the time, Fiorenza and the USCCB also urged "fresh thinking and new approaches to the ongoing crisis in Iraq," while reiterating Iraq's duty to work toward peace (Fiorenza 1999; see also USCCB 2001). The bishops later were joined by twenty-four other denominational leaders, who pleaded in a 1999 letter to President Clinton, "The international community *cannot* pursue its legitimate goals of eliminating Iraq's weapons of mass destruction by threatening the lives and livelihood of innocent people" (USCCB 1999; my emphasis). The authors of this ecumenical letter were issuing a moral statement. However, the force of their claim is more hard-hitting when we understand that this was politically and empirically true as well. Not only were sanctions morally suspect, as the bishops' repeated calls for "fresh thinking" suggest; *sanctions were not working, politically speaking, either*. This assertion calls for clear explication, for some critics of the invasion might cite the lack of WMD found in Iraq as evidence of the effectiveness of the sanctions regime.

To begin with, failure to find WMD in Iraq after the war shows that the problem was not simply flawed pre-war intelligence but

over-reliance upon a defunct policy of containment, sanctions, and inspections. Deployed against a *non-compliant* regime, such a strategy cannot be monitored accurately or effectively over an extended period of time. Furthermore, even though post-war inspection teams under David Kay did not find large caches of WMD, they did discover extensive violations of UN Security Council resolutions—some quite significant—that had escaped the notice of UN inspectors in Iraq just prior to the invasion.[14] Second, Hussein's unremitting intentions to develop WMD were never disputed; those who carefully studied the problem concluded that efforts to reform or realign sanctions would not have transformed his intentions (see Mead 2003; Bronson 2003; Cortright 2001; and United States Department of State 1999). Moreover, his willingness to interdict and deploy dual-use materials for WMD production undermined efforts to enact more-targeted sanctions like those the bishops recommended (Mueller and Mueller 1999, 49–50). Saddam Hussein's overall strategy, it was widely held, was to deceive inspectors long enough to pressure the international community into lifting sanctions altogether, whereupon the production of WMD could resume. Based upon deep international disdain for sanctions and growing resentment toward the United States, this strategy seemed to be working. Calls for lifting sanctions were vociferous until the sudden threat of an invasion reversed the trend.

Finally, we learned after the invasion how extensively the corrupt UN oil-for-food sanctions program benefited Saddam Hussein's regime (to the tune of about $21 billion) as well as the economies of many Western nations. Even before the war, we knew that this program allowed Saddam to withhold needed medical supplies from Iraqis, to resell them to other nations for profit, and to redistribute them to Baathist loyalists in exchange for political support. Saddam's exploitations of sanctions contributed to the deaths of several hundred thousand Iraqi children in the 1990s (United States Department of State 1999). By controlling food rations, Saddam portrayed himself as benevolent bread-giver; by forcing all citizens to register for ration cards, he turned the oil-for-food program into an apparatus of his repressive police state (see Rieff 2003). Given all of this, it seems reasonable to conclude that, morally *and* politically, sanctions were not working. One might reasonably conclude that the most tenable alternative to this unjust, ineffective sanctions regime was a new regime in Iraq, which became official policy in 1998 under President Clinton.

[14] If many of these violations had been known in February 2003, one wonders if there would have been more support for the war. The violations detailed in Kay's report also are discussed in Kagan and Kristol 2005, 28–29.

To be clear, Saddam Hussein deserves the blame for exploiting sanctions for his benefit. He remains explicitly culpable for the sins of commission involving the internal sanctions he imposed on his own people. However, after thirteen years of external UN sanctions with no end in sight, the international community assumed, as the bishops suggested, implicit culpability for its sins of omission: for not finding a better solution to a problem with no end in sight. It was time, as they rightly asserted, for "fresh thinking" about Iraq. The argument for military intervention in Iraq could have been morally perspicuous had Presidents Clinton or Bush begun making the case for using force in light of such reasoning, after Saddam Hussein evicted UN inspectors in 1998 and before September 11, 2001. For their part, the bishops could have expressed more openness to alternatives to sanctions involving limited use of force. Ironically, though, their strong presumption against force and strict interpretation of just war principles undermined their moral commitment to ending sanctions and the suffering of millions of Iraqis.

One kind of ethical realist approach could have drawn together more closely the political and moral implications of existing Iraq policy, perhaps arguing something to the following effect: the United States and UN have worked for over a decade to enforce Iraq's compliance with numerous UN resolutions in order to defend the security interests of many nations; this containment strategy relies upon a regime of sanctions that is morally dubious, takes an excessive and indiscriminate toll on Iraqi civilians, and is a blight on—and source of resentment against—the United States and UN; Saddam Hussein poses a long-term threat too great to warrant removing sanctions or further limiting them; therefore, a more just (or less immoral) option, and a more effective approach for dealing with this threat, may require using *discriminate force* against (and possibly removing) the precondition and root cause for sanctions—the regime responsible for both human suffering and geopolitical insecurity. Perhaps such politico-ethical reasoning could have garnered the support of just war thinkers and others motivated by genuine humanitarian concerns for the Iraqi people, even if it may not have galvanized the political will of the international community or the American people. We will never know. As it turned out, the early unwillingness to consider publicly the need for a more humane, military alternative to sanctions prepared the ground for a terrible irony: when the case for war finally was put forth, just war moralism obstructed efforts to end the very suffering that it had roundly condemned for years.

Appreciating the irony of war predisposes us to anticipate how the moral stakes of war are deeply embedded in political decisions to use or withhold force—more so than prevailing deliberation often reveals.

Integrating more clearly the moral and political realities in Iraq would have offered an approach that addressed the bishops' concerns about Iraqi civilians. An ethical realist position might even have accepted reluctantly the case for using force in Iraq—for moral and political reasons—despite the honest recognition that the administration's stated reasons for intervention did not conform fully to just war guidance. Niebuhr, in a famous lament of just war reasoning, criticized those "moralists who would refrain from all war, because the issues of any particular war are always filled with ambiguities" (1964, 284). The rigorist expectation that politics can or will conform to its interpretation of just war principles may ask more of states than they realistically show themselves willing to oblige given their tendencies to pursue their interests. This is not a moral defense of such *raison d'état* but an urge to incorporate the imperfect reasoning and actions of states into our moral reflection. In rejecting the argument for force, just war moralism abandoned the opportunity either to advance a pivotal moral cause that sought to end sanctions or to offer a more substantive alternative to the argument for regime change. An ethical realist, despite deep reservations, might have reasoned differently: that some form of force was the only feasible way to break the deadlock of an endless, inhumane containment policy—even though the case for war was not couched, as it should have been, in these terms. This discussion affords no reason to conclude that Niebuhr himself would have thrown his support behind the Iraq War; it only suggests that a neo-Niebuhrian form of ethical realism diverges from the position put forth by the war's most principled moral critics.

2.2 *Liberal internationalism*

Much of the moral deliberation in the prelude to the Iraq War took the form of strong opposition to war, evident in just war rigorism and another mode one might call "liberal internationalism." Ethical realism strives to provide an intellectual framework in which such deliberation can be assessed and sharpened by realistic political analysis. Ethical realism does not necessarily favor war but demands a shrewd political appraisal of a moral position's feasibility, costs, and alternatives.

The creative minds at Sojourners, a progressive Christian ministry, and other Protestant leaders put forward "An Alternative to War for Defeating Saddam Hussein," a religiously grounded internationalist plan to avoid war by relying on institutions and initiatives of the United Nations (Sojourners 2003). The tenets of the proposal were discussed in a meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the eve of war, in February 2003. Like the U.S. Catholic bishops, the Sojourners-led group denounced Saddam Hussein's regime and

behavior and expressed concern for Iraq's people. Unlike the U.S. Catholic bishops, the Sojourners' effort to fashion "a 'third way' between war and ineffectual responses" made their recommendations more precise and, in their view, "strong enough to be a serious alternative to war." The platform relied upon several concrete steps. First, its authors proposed to remove Saddam Hussein from power by establishing a UN-sponsored tribunal to indict him for crimes against humanity—an idea taken from the playbook of Human Rights Watch (Roth 2006, 88). Modeled on tribunals in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, an Iraq tribunal would "set into motion both internal and external forces that might remove him from power. It would make it clear that no solution to this conflict will include Saddam or his supporters staying in power." Second, Sojourners' "Alternative to War" called for intrusive and "greatly intensified inspections" and for strengthening the embargo through UN resolutions. Third, they advised fostering democracy by planning for "a post-Saddam Iraq—administered temporarily by the UN and backed by an international armed force—rather than a U.S. military occupation." Fourth, they issued a call to initiate a massive UN-led humanitarian effort for Iraq's citizens.

Let us take these ideas in turn. Bringing Saddam Hussein to justice for his crimes against Iraqis and other nations surely was warranted. Indeed, the U.S. State Department had been collecting documentation at least as early as 1999 for the day he would enter the dock. But this proposal neglects the reality that the *post*-war precedents cited succeeded only after hostilities ended and once the ruler was ousted. Were Iraqis expected simply to vote Saddam out of office? Indicting Hussein would have prompted no rebellion within Iraq given his regime of intimidation and his violent suppression of past uprisings. It is equally doubtful that an indictment would have spawned an international alliance to ease him out of office or overthrow him.[15] In short, the proposal leaves unanswered how an indictment would lead to Saddam's removal.

The statement's plea for more aggressive UN inspections does not discuss how this would have been achieved given Iraq's persistent defiance, evasion, and manipulation of existing UN inspections. Nor does the statement propose a long-term solution that countered Iraq's intent to develop WMD; in fact, had Saddam been able to parlay temporary adherence to inspections into his long-term agenda to coerce the lifting of sanctions, the proposal might have enabled his cause. As for the proposal to plan for a post-Saddam Iraq, this unquestionably should have been undertaken. Based upon what we now know, the U.S.

[15] An international tribunal also would not address Iraqis' desires to try Saddam Hussein (see Carlson 2008a).

failure to plan for the post-invasion phase had terrible consequences. The statement, however, does not describe how a "post-Saddam" state of affairs would be achieved in which such planning would matter. Finally, the call to increase aid to Iraqi civilians, while morally on target, overlooks Saddam's well-documented unwillingness to participate even in existing relief efforts (United States Department of State 1999).

The Sojourners statement attests to an implicit faith that the work of international institutions can overcome the need for war. While we should not denigrate the importance of such institutions, overconfidence in them may be misguided. (Recall that UN headquarters was one of the first targets of the incipient insurgency; the UN pulled out of Iraq thereafter.) What ultimately is lacking in the Sojourners statement is recognition of the coercive force that this "alternative to war" would have required. Had Sojourners lobbied for these proposals earlier on, such efforts to work through the UN might have enhanced the ability to prevent war. However, the UN also would have embroiled itself in further efforts to work around a government whose cunning, deceit, and malice was proving insuperable. This internationalist plan might have pushed the boundaries of "last resort" back another ten yards, but the need for force would have come soon enough. We return to the dilemma that the UN and its member nations did not collectively possess the resources, nor perhaps the will, to achieve a sustainable long-term solution or even to enforce effectively existing UN resolutions that Iraq ignored. Iraq had violated the terms of its parole, and UN policy was as failed as the state itself. How much stronger the internationalist cause would have been had its adherents earlier heeded Michael Walzer's advice:

> There was a just and necessary war to be fought back in the 1990s . . . an internationalist war. . . . [Its] justice would have derived, first, from the justice of the peace agreement it was enforcing and, second, from its likely outcome, the strengthening of the UN and of the global legal order [2002].

Indeed, by offering these proposals at "the eleventh hour" as "the world is poised on the edge of war" the Sojourners group undercut the creativity and moral vitality that they might have enjoyed years earlier. Ironically, coming as late as it did, the proposal served to reinforce the perception of UN fecklessness.

One reason that internationalist actors, particularly those of a religious persuasion, were unable to bring about such a global legal order may stem from an embarrassment with power—a point brought home by the Sojourners statement that offered up viable, constructive proposals that lacked only one thing: the call for coercive force needed

to bring them about. The statement refuses to acknowledge that force and regime change would have been necessary to conduct reliable inspections, to try Saddam for war crimes, to foster a democratic Iraq, and to provide humanitarian relief to Iraqis. In the end, these quite worthy moral-political "goals" actually turned out to be means to the greater end of averting war. The reluctance to accept the necessity of coercion ignores Niebuhr's charge that

> it is not possible to build a community without the manipulation of power and that it is not possible to use power and remain completely "pure." We must not have an easy conscience about the impurities of politics or they will reach intolerable proportions. But we must also find religious means of easing the conscience, or our uneasy conscience will tempt us into irresponsibility [1992, 205].

Moralist varieties of internationalism overestimated the effectiveness that UN actions could achieve (short of ousting Saddam) and overlooked that the successes of UN resolution 1441 in 2002 were influenced by the presence of U.S. forces in the region, poised for invasion.

Niebuhr himself was an internationalist of sorts who was committed to the importance of multilateral political relations and who lamented "irresponsible criticisms" of the UN (1953, 16). However, he also cautioned about the always limited efficacy of international government to create community; he understood the limitations of human will and collective identity that undermine efforts to create world government. Accordingly, he had little hope that an international body could create sufficient harmony to transcend certain gritty realities of politics. His ethical realism encourages us to resist the idea that international bodies can serve as a moral imprimatur for the use of power and force, particularly when actions carried out by states, though impure and tainted by national interest, may be capable of bringing about worthy moral aims.

The irony of internationalists undermining their own moral commitments, due to embarrassment over power or national interests, is facilitated by the illusion that international bodies are somehow free of the interests that corrupt nations. The legacy of ethical realism urges us to resist such pretensions. As Niebuhr scholar Robin Lovin soberly reflects,

> It is an axiom of realism that any system that is given exclusive power to adjudicate between important interests held by competing parties will tend to develop interests of its own. . . . The fact that today's international institutions have few interests that we need to worry about, compared to the interests of states, is a function of the fact that they have little real power. Given more power, they would acquire more interest [2003, 163].

The current global reality is that nations rely upon international institutions to do the things that, realists say, polities always do: promote their interests and maintain a balance of powers.[16] States, we expect, will continue to use the UN to do their bidding. Ethical realism accepts that international bodies are integral to questions of politics, war, and justice among states, but it cautions against viewing them as impartial and supra-national institutions with claims to justice that can be disentangled from the interests of states or, increasingly, interests of their own.

Niebuhr grasped that there is no inoculation against national sin and self-interest. There is only the humble acceptance of its ineradicable presence that exists in tension with the moral potential of political action. Niebuhr's ethical realism is steeped in a deep moral belief in American political responsibility, and he remained willing to risk responsible political action besmirched by imperfection over the flight from political power to preserve moral purism. Niebuhr's ethical realism differs from moralism in its greater toleration of "the moral ambiguities of world politics" and the "moral taint that is involved in all political action," which may be necessary to achieve a greater measure of justice in the world (1992, 203). It is a corollary that clarity about our lack of perfect virtue helps us resist such moralism. For with political humility, we *neither* embarrass from our power such that we preserve our moral purity at the expense of our political responsibilities *nor* embrace a too confident sense of our moral strength that, unexpectedly, brings about its opposite. It is this latter possibility I now take up.

2.3 *Foreign policy pietism*

U.S. foreign policy in the Iraq War can be explored along similar realist and moralist lines. Realism, we said, looks at how politics *really* (not ideally) works. Since Bodin and Hobbes, the modern realist school has been preoccupied with sovereignty and the state. Realists explain the behavior of states by analyzing how they preserve power and pursue their interests, particularly in war. At one level, the United States has maintained a highly realist profile. In the global war on terror and the war in Iraq, it has confronted states linked to terrorism and other perceived threats to the United States. In order to protect its

[16] In withholding Security Council votes authorizing war in Iraq, several nations protected their economic interests and checked the uni-polar power of the United States. Under the mantle of UN legitimacy—including the sanctions regime and the oil-for-food program—these nations profited significantly from lucrative oil contracts (Rieff 2005, 185–204).

interests, the United States has sought to preserve its own sovereignty and power by renouncing or withdrawing from numerous international treaties; publicly promulgating the right to engage in preemptive war; and stating its willingness to act militarily without seeking a UN "permission slip." Finally, expansion of executive power, resort to "dirty hands" tactics, and reliance upon covert programs at odds with civil liberties all suggest adherence to Machiavellian strategies.

Nonetheless, a case can be made that the United States has not been realistic enough in its foreign policy outlook, that it was not attentive to shifting climates of global politics in the prelude to the Iraq War, and that this myopia has undermined U.S. interests. The fixation over the preemption doctrine, designed to enhance U.S. security, ironically, coincided with accelerated efforts by North Korea and Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. The preemption doctrine became an incendiary distraction that drew attention away from a cause that, à la Walzer, could have distributed the burden of the Iraq problem widely across the international community. Moreover, announcements by key administration officials in the summer of 2002 that the United States was contemplating regime change against Iraq alienated potential allies; the die already was cast when the United States went before the UN that fall and shifted the argument from regime change to disarmament and enforcement of UN resolutions.

The shortcomings of the U.S. administration's pre-war reasoning exhibit the same failures that plague other forms of moralism, specifically, over-reliance upon one's moral principles, coupled with an unwillingness to take seriously certain political realities. One lesson of realism the administration ignored is that there is nothing necessary about hinging national interest to sovereignty or states. While the U.S. administration played by the rules of twentieth-century realism and its view of a world divided among sovereign states, it neglected new realities of international politics in the twenty-first.[17] Most obviously, the gravest security threats are non-state terrorist actors who, in the case of the Iraq War, had nothing to do with the state the United States invaded. Another new reality in the era of globalization is that governments and their citizens increasingly see the world through global

[17] Realist and Niebuhr admirer Hans Morgenthau appreciated this, affirming, "While the realist indeed believes that interest is the perennial standard by which political action must be judged and directed, the contemporary connection between interest and the nation state is a product of history, and is therefore bound to disappear in the course of history. Nothing in the realist position militates against the assumption that the present division of the political world into nation states will be replaced by larger units of a quite different character, more in keeping with the technical potentialities and the moral requirements of the contemporary world" (1967, 9).

lenses that have replaced the old Westphalian spectacles. In hopes of enhancing their influence and securing their interests, polities often voluntarily pool and limit their own sovereignty by forming organizations like the European Union or International Criminal Court; or by signing international treaties, trade agreements, and other conventions that praise transnational ideals and establish global norms concerning human rights or the environment. Of course, some nations may see their sovereignty and interests threatened by such global trends. But these nations should not openly flout them, publicly denounce them, or rub others' noses in the dirt of their defiance of them. This only invites charges of "unilateralism" that jeopardize national alliances and interests. How much better off the United States would have been had it encountered the troubles it did in Iraq with more widespread help from the international community. Even if a UN mandate for war was never achieved, a slower run-up to war would have given more time to show how the UN strategies were failing. Instead, though, U.S. defiance of the new internationalism eroded its "soft power" or ability to influence and compel others by perceived force of legitimacy (Nye 2003).

How the United States appears to the rest of the world is crucial to its interests. The pivotal importance of perception evokes the counsel of influential realist and famed child of darkness, Niccolo Machiavelli, who appreciated that how one appears in the eyes of others is an essential political reality that a "prince" must seize to his advantage: "Everyone sees how you appear, few touch what you are . . ." (1998, 71). To this end, a little cunning, flattery, gamesmanship, and finesse are essential tools of the realist kit. Niebuhr spared no contempt for Machiavelli's dark ilk, but he admired their political adroitness, which contrasts with the foibles of moralist children of light. In the sticky web of political affairs, ethical realism is resourced not only by moral norms but also by *realpolitik*. Niebuhr thus called upon children of light to arm themselves

> with the wisdom of the children of darkness but [to] remain free from their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have this wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness, and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community [1944, 41].

Moralist children of light must check their own pride and interests so they might use their power and interests for moral purposes. Humility also becomes a crucial tool of ethical realist statecraft, powerful in limiting one's own moral pretensions, vital to one's image in the eyes of others, and necessary to extending the ethical impact of politics, statesmanship, and war.

Had the U.S. administration followed sage realist counsel in its diplomacy—publicly praising even if privately sidestepping the Kyoto Protocol, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, and other treaties; exhausting appeals to the UN *before* publicly calling for regime change; abandoning explicit talk of preemption even if it is always implicit in a state's foreign policy—it would have enhanced its standing in the world, redounding to its own interests as well. Had the United States shown the shrewdness to adopt different tactics, arguing its case on internationalist grounds, and had it sought the patience to let this process play out—a few years perhaps, rather than a few months—it would have received more cooperation and perhaps encountered fewer obstacles in Iraq. Even when things turned out badly, as they did, if Iraq had been an international protectorate, it would have been the world's problem to fix and the world's blood, treasure, and political capital called upon to fix it (Wright 2006). This would have been less costly to American interests than the course that was taken.

What can explain the avoidance of these lessons of realism? The administration, it seems, was suffused by a moralism of its own, what we might call *foreign policy pietism*. As evidence, consider the President's speech of less than a month before the invasion, where he discusses the moral aims that the invasion would bring about:

> We defend the security of our country, but our cause is broader. If war is forced upon us, we will liberate the people of Iraq from a cruel and violent dictator. The Iraqi people today are not treated with dignity, but they have a right to live in dignity. The Iraqi people today are not allowed to speak out for freedom, but they have a right to live in freedom. We don't believe freedom and liberty are America's gift to the world; we believe they are the Almighty's gift to mankind. And for the oppressed people of Iraq, people whose lives we care about, the day of freedom is drawing near [Bush 2003a].[18]

As well, there is America's "calling" to safeguard peoples' God-given freedom (Bush 2003c). Cynics who would decry such rhetoric as moral cover for a realist strategy must account not only for how such moral language and pursuits have undermined U.S. national interests but also for other initiatives that point toward a morally suffused foreign policy—sustained efforts to thwart sex trafficking, stem the tide of

[18] Appealing to Iraqis, he pledged to ". . . deliver the food and medicine you need. We will tear down the apparatus of terror and we will help you to build a new Iraq that is prosperous and free. In a free Iraq, there will be no more wars of aggression against your neighbors, no more poison factories, no more executions of dissidents, no more torture chambers and rape rooms. The tyrant will soon be gone. The day of your liberation is near" (Bush 2003b).

HIV/AIDS abroad, stop modern-day slavery, preserve religious liberty abroad, and end civil war in Sudan (Mead 2006; Bumiller 2003).

Many of these endeavors illustrate strong and (in my view) exemplary moral conviction. *In toto*, they demonstrate the President's commitment to a foreign policy agenda motivated by genuine moral regard, but these endeavors are also the parcels of an unflagging and uncompromising moralism—an American messianism that jeopardizes the very moral commitments (as well as the national interests) to which they ostensibly are committed. This messianism carried over to how the United States approached the decision to invade Iraq. The most glaring examples involve the abysmal policy failures of the occupation (see Packer 2005; Ricks 2006). Perhaps only moralist naïveté or blind faith in the power of human freedom can explain why so little post-war planning was undertaken. Foreign policy pietism, it seems, is no less virulent a strain of moralism than other variants given its failure to engage political realities head-on or to embrace the full scope of realist resources needed to bring about its moral agenda.

Moral values alone do not a moralist make. What apparently committed the President and his administration to a messianic moralism is that he was so morally convinced of his cause that he did not see with a clear-eyed view certain political realities of the new global order. Ignoring Machiavelli's counsel, the President did not fully appreciate the indispensable role of worldwide perception, that few could touch him or see him as he sees himself. As a moralist, perhaps he believed that the world would come to his side because of his morally compelling outlook. His administration, invigorated by the faith in human freedom, believed it could dispense with the gritty business of politics, diplomacy, and nation-building. The harvest of this messianic moralism gave way to sectarian blood-letting and a horrid humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq that undermined not only the security interests of the United States but, ironically, the administration's moral agenda as well.

The Iraq War is a lesson in how easily America can be blinded by its righteousness. Like other moralist children of light of which Niebuhr warned, many in the United States underestimated how brazenly our interests were on display to the rest of the world. These interests involve something more than simple concerns for national security, which would be understandable enough had they been jeopardized as desperately as was contended. Nor does the rhetoric of conquest, empire, or crusade begin to explain these interests. Rather, the American self-interest that was sublimated through moralistic discourse was nothing less than the lust for glory common to all nations and peoples: the desire to assert one's identity and ideals; the aspiration to have one's values recognized and respected; and the zeal to vindicate one's

innocence and goodness before the world. The irony of a messianic strain of moralism, Niebuhr gleaned, is that when we fail to recognize the extent of our own self-interest, the strength of our moral convictions becomes a liability. Virtue turns to vice; "a too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice" (Niebuhr 1952, 138).

Ethical realism tempers such moral aspirations with political humility and awareness of one's own yearning for glory. One solution entails cultivating practices that remind us of our moral culpability. The ethical realist resists moral perfectionism and messianism alike, embracing certain practices of *realpolitik* as children of darkness do, albeit for different reasons—to dispel the illusion of our innocence and bring about the child of light's moral agenda. The irony of moralism (wherein moral conviction jeopardizes moral virtue) often thrives on a worldview that preserves stark divisions between good and evil. This was evident in the administration's messianism much as it was for those who demonized it. For Niebuhr, though, the human capacity for self-transcendence *enables* us to make relative distinctions between good and evil, between justice and injustice; the nature of sin and the dangers of human evil *require* us to make such distinctions in undertaking political action (1964, 222). "Equality of sin, inequality of guilt" was Niebuhr's apposite refrain. Niebuhr's realism resisted the tendency to absolutize one's own claim to justice, in order to avoid eliciting its contemptible opposite. It warns of the limits of politics yet reminds us of the responsibilities attendant to human freedom, responsibilities that make moral action in politics not only possible but necessary.

Different strains of moralism all proffered reasons for opposing or supporting the Iraq War. As in other wars, moralists became blinded by their perspectives, unable to embrace the ambiguities and compromises needed to rescue their moral causes from themselves; this was as true of those too opposed to war to see that force was needed to further their moral commitments as for those too ready to use force to see how war undermined their moral agenda. Regardless of the variant, moralistic arguments resisted offering politically tenable plans that extolled the humility and shrewd use of power needed for the United States to live up to its moral and political responsibilities.

3. *Rashomon* Redux or "How to Make a Strong Moral Argument Without Sounding Moralistic"

Where would Niebuhr have come down on Iraq? Was it a war against tyranny like World War II, which he supported, or as he viewed Vietnam, a venture that stretched America's aspirations and enflamed its pretensions—a diversionary conflict mistakenly lumped under the rubric of a broader ideological struggle? Would he have foreseen that

the moral arguments for war were more compelling than the political rationale? What reasons would he have provided for declaring war on Iraq or not? This essay wagers that Niebuhr's answers to these questions are less critical than the contribution his ethical realism makes for analyzing the Iraq War and for moral reflection on the arguments, motives, legacies, and ironies of American war more generally.

Ethical realism provides a conceptual framework for evaluating the moral aspirations and political feasibility of other moral frameworks. As in *Rashomon*, each moral framework contains some element of truth, though none is morally definitive. Rather than being frustrated by such indeterminacy, ethical realism keeps various moral perspectives in play. In some cases, ethical realism enjoys a certain compatibility with them or provides correctives to their moralistic variants. However, it differs from these moral frameworks by focusing less on the ethical principles or final judgments of war than on the contexts shaping those judgments and on the tensions between moral commitments and political limits that constrain such decisions. Ethical realism proffers cautions, not rules. Inviting self-critical reflection, it offers a more comprehensive meta-ethical approach to thinking morally (though not moralistically) about war.

"How to make a strong moral argument without sounding moralistic"—lifted from William Lee Miller's ethical biography of Lincoln (2003, 286)—returns us to the insight of Lincoln's ethical realism. For despite his embrace of certain strategies that seem to undermine his moral legacy, Lincoln was as convinced of the evil and injustice of slavery as he was of the moral potential of politics, and the necessity of war, to end it. He foresaw that over time there could be no lasting political order without justice: the union could not survive the cancer of slavery. However, he also knew that the suffusion of moralism in war would not bring about changes that would either end slavery or save the union. Niebuhr carved out a comparable middle ground position between moralism and darker forms of realism; he enjoined combining the virtue and ideals of the former with the wisdom, means, and savvy of the latter. Ethical realism helps us appreciate the contributions of figures like Lincoln and the limitations that politics wields over moral aspirations. Thus, might "children of light" be warned of their own moral pretensions without, at the same time, closing off the ethical force and vitality that leaven political pursuits.

Given America's ironic experience of war—the apparent contrast between morality and politics; the disparity between why we wage war and how we remember war's legacy; the hazards of moralistic thinking hindering its own pursuit of justice—where do we go from here? Niebuhr presumed that recognition of irony would dissolve it by

eliciting embarrassment and contrition. This study of ethical realism, however, has shown the irony of war to be ambivalent, suggesting a possibility Niebuhr did not consider. That is, on occasion, we might reluctantly accept some ironies out of a thoughtful, humble appreciation that America's experience of war often (though not always or inevitably) involves strategic political causes giving way to lasting moral legacies—not accidentally but because ethical concerns often are tied intimately to causes deemed vital to U.S. national interests. We might assent to the ambiguities of politics, ethics, and war and yet, as Niebuhr counseled, resist becoming frustrated by them so that our political interests might be aligned more closely to those moral-humanitarian values they sometimes oppose. For unlike moralists and cynical realists, each of whom sees ethics and politics too distinctly, the ethical realists perceive their inextricability, thus embracing stratagem and force as instruments of justice, power and self-interest so as to curtail human suffering, and grim political realities in the hope of a braver moral order.[19]

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