

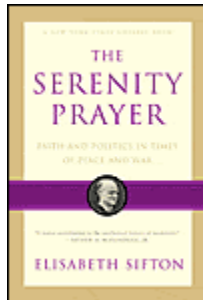


Radical Truths of Christian Realism

The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr

Elisabeth Sifton , Joel H. Rosenthal

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The Serenity Prayer:
Faith and Politics in
Times of Peace and War

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Introduction

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Today I get to seize the microphone and have the high honor of introducing the guest. Whenever I have that opportunity, though, I like to use that opportunity to thank Joanne Myers, who is our Director of Public Affairs Programs here at the Carnegie Council, and who does wonderful introductions, as well as wonderful organization of this program, which you all benefit from. So, Joanne, thank you for all of your work.

It is also the first opportunity I have had this season to talk about our new format. You have received in the mail the announcements of our lectures. You'll see that we have had some new ideas for organizing the Public Affairs series. There are three series that are announced in the mailing. The one we'll be discussing tonight is **The Resurgence of Religion in Politics**.

You will see that it will give us, by focusing on these three themes—in particular, the religion theme this evening and in the coming weeks—the opportunity to talk together in a cumulative way about some of the issues that we're all concerned about. It will also give us the opportunity to collect some of the information, either through audio cassettes or CDs or Pod-casting, perhaps, to give you and also people beyond the people who are able to come to this room access to the wonderful material, the wonderful speakers, the wonderful conversations that we have here at the Carnegie Council. So we just ask you to bear with us as we get the new system in place. I am confident that you will all benefit from it.

Let me just say a word about the religion series, to refresh our memory about what are some of the questions that we have outlined. You will see that they are very general in nature. That is by design. It's a chance for us to think broadly and to invite people with a wide range of views on these things.

Here are the questions:

- Religious fervor is growing, reshaping the identities and actions of an increasingly large number of people around the world, from Africa to the Americas. What does this faith-based politics mean for the future?
- Is the current resurgence of religion in the modern world an attempt to harness traditional moral and ethical resources for contemporary use, or is there something more going on?
- Does a more religious world inevitably mean a more divided world?
- Can religious language and community be harnessed as a force for peace?

- Can pluralism prevail in the face of rising tides of faith-based politics and against a background where religious extremism threatens?

If only we had [Professor Niebuhr](#) here to help us with some of these questions.

With that as the background, let me do a proper introduction of our guest, Elisabeth Sifton. Anyone who is even remotely acquainted with the legacy of the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr must be gratified to see that Elisabeth Sifton has written a book, [The Serenity Prayer](#), to share her reflections on her father's life and work. We want to thank you, Elisabeth, for coming to share some of those reflections with us this afternoon.

The timing of this discussion is telling. Given the high, high moralism of our political leadership and our political climate, many among us have been asking a simple question: Where is the legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr when we need it? Where is the man who taught us to be wary of our own self-professed innocence, not to be intoxicated with our own goodness, not to fall victim to a sense of moral certainty?

As the columnist [David Brooks](#) put it, where is the man on the gray horse, the man who can teach us to see beyond simple black and white? Where is the man who taught us to understand that humility is a virtue in politics, not a weakness?

The sense of timeliness is registered by the fact that [Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.](#), weighs in on these very questions in last Sunday's *New York Times Book Review*. I hope many of you saw that. In his piece titled "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr," Professor Schlesinger paraphrases Reinhold Niebuhr this way: "Americans are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever we most fervently desire. This is vanity. To be effective in the world, we need a sense of modesty about the virtue, wisdom, and power available to us and a sense of contrition about the common human frailties and foibles which lie at the foundation of both the enemy's demony and our vanities."

It is especially appropriate that Elisabeth Sifton share her reflections and experiences here at the Carnegie Council. [George Kennan](#), speaking for an entire generation of self-professed realists in the foreign-policy establishment, once said famously, "Reinhold Niebuhr is the father of us all." I hope you don't mind sharing.

For us at the Carnegie Council, we do feel Professor Niebuhr is in our DNA. His approach to ethics in politics illuminates a path that we still try to navigate today, taking the world as we find it, yet working for transcendent principles and ideals that reflect a true moral purpose.

In claiming him as our own, as many do, the Carnegie Council does, in fact, have a unique claim. You may not know this, but Reinhold Niebuhr was the winner of the Carnegie Council's 1915 essay contest. His essay was titled "Patriotism and Altruism." According to the official history of the Carnegie Council, Reinhold Niebuhr was then a graduate student at Yale School of Religion. At that time, he was deeply skeptical of the Council's enthusiasm for the international arbitration of disputes, and he let us know it. We have always been open to a range of views, as you know. A realist from the beginning, Reinhold Niebuhr was always skeptical, but never a cynic.

It is a genuine pleasure for me to welcome Elisabeth Sifton back to the Carnegie Council. Ms. Sifton is Senior Vice President at Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux. She is also the author of the recent book *The Serenity Prayer*, as I mentioned, which I commend to all of you as a wonderful entry point to the issues of ethics in politics that we will discuss together this afternoon.

Thank you.

Remarks

ELISABETH SIFTON: It really is indeed a great honor for me to be part of this Carnegie series. I am deeply grateful to you for your invitation.

I had no idea about the 1915 precedent. I'm delighted by it, I must say.

I feel I must say right at the outset, as you must surely realize, that I have no—and I mean no—professional expertise in the matters that we are going to discuss today. But I'm pleased to see that it isn't just Niebuhr's blood relatives who believe that his approach to these thorny problems was effective and empowering, that his wisdom was recognized at the time, then, and is again, belatedly, today.

In our present circumstances, as Joel has said, when the United States, unrivaled in its military and cultural might, seems so tragically ineffectual and incoherent, so constrained and uncertain, it would be wise to reexamine the, I think, bold and plausible Niebuhrian way of thinking about Christianity and power politics, to use the title of one of his books. I don't want to channel my father, exactly, though, and I have a prejudice against interpreting the present scene from the point of view of thinkers who are no longer with us. There are pundits who do this, who brazenly put a Niebuhrian label on positions that were not his, concerning issues that he didn't grapple with. But I don't believe they have gotten him or the issues right. Theirs is a fatiguing business, and I don't want to prolong it, so I'm not going to wrangle with them.

For a while, though, I will note, Niebuhr did go out of fashion. In the 1960s, the new Left attacked him for being a hard-line cold warrior, who sold out to the establishment. This was very far off the mark. Many of the naysayers were, in fact, nowhere near so radical in their critique of American power nor so daring in their prescriptions as he.

In the 1970s, conservatives began to claim him for their own. David Brooks was one of them, a little later, saying that Niebuhr's opposition to the Soviet Union and his insistence on being tough-minded about realistic choices showed that he was on their side. This was equally ridiculous, and they, too, had to excise and disallow aspects of the Niebuhrian position that were, in fact, central to my father's view.

Meanwhile, let's attend to what I called in the title "Radical Truths of Christian Doctrine," truths that Niebuhr believed did have a bearing on our life as a nation in the global community. I would like to work from the outside in, if I may, tackling first the cloudy rhetorical penumbra surrounding these issues, because we ought to start by agreeing on the terms we're using.

When we speak of religion, what are we speaking of? Are we speaking about doctrines concerning something supernatural that people call God, some larger-than-universal principle that people say they believe in, and even want to worship, whatever that means? That's what most atheists and secularists think is the name of the game, which, be it Hindu, Christian, Muslim, or Jewish, they mock for its old-fashioned irrationality. Why should a modern rational person need such a belief system, let alone the superstructure or infrastructure used to sustain it?

Or are we speaking of inner spiritual experience, which, believers say, changes their lives and gives them meaning—the varieties of religious experience that [William James](#) wrote about that charismatic evangelicals of all faiths insist is the fundament of their faith and power? That's what more and more people are associating with religion today. Perhaps it's that the more complex and ungovernable our hectic, uncertain global community becomes, the more people crave this mysterious inner reassurance of lived faith.

Also, as my father often observed, a religion like this, which puts a premium on reassurance, attracts many hitherto secular people who are disillusioned, disappointed, or disgusted with what he called, fifty years ago, "our gadget-filled paradise suspended in a hell of international insecurity."

Or are we speaking about the organized institutions that represent such doctrines and experiences—churches, faith-based groups (I hate the term), denominations and sects, synagogues and mosques? When the pope talks, this is what he means. This is what he has in mind. When politicians and national leaders talk about religion, they usually have this institutional model in mind, too, especially the institutions that deliver votes.

We must keep all three definitions in mind, but keep them separate, too, because each one of them is

strongly in evidence in America and the world today.

Indeed, the truth that religion has been woven into the very fabric of our national life from the start is an important point to make. Recently, for distressing reasons, to me, that I will examine, evangelical fundamentalists, along with the Roman Catholic [Justice Scalia](#), have wanted it more fully acknowledged. By now we all know the heartwarming foundational image of [John Winthrop's "City on a Hill,"](#) which Reagan dressed up to be "A Shining City on a Hill." The actual reality of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was bloody, impure, and intolerant, as well as brave and noble. But the Puritans did conceive of it as a community directed by God's word. Religious energies have indeed mingled for centuries with our founders' enlightenment, faith in reason, and reason alone.

This has created what Niebuhr, speaking ironically, as he so often did, called "America's achieved utopia," fashioning a culture that was, as he said, both more religious and more secular than any other nation's, and one with a remarkable capacity for believing itself blessed with greatness.

In the development of this culture, he reminded us, American secularism has its own idolatries, its utopian confidence in the redeeming powers of reason or progress of the scientific method to solve mankind's problems. The combination of bold secular self-confidence and a messianic conviction that God puts special meaning into the American experience has made for notable delusions of grandeur.

What of the church's involvement in this enterprise? Niebuhr wrote that the Christian faith, in its "classical form, presents the beauty and terror of life without evasion, and Christ was the symbol both of the indeterminate possibilities of good transcending history and also of divine mercy which knows about the ambiguity of all human virtue."

But while people might be committed to the ethical ideas of Jesus, he continued, while they might believe that Christians were "the sole, or at least the chief, agents of redemptive energy in society," it was "very difficult to persuade them to consider the meaning of this ideal in specific situations"—to put it mildly.

He went on: "The significance of Jesus for the religious life of the Western world is due to his attainment in incarnation of a spiritual and moral ideal." But the question is, how does one attain this ideal? Most people simply gave themselves over to "the pleasant hope that time and natural progress will bring inevitable triumph to every virtuous enterprise," as he put it.

The simplistic banality of this watered-down Christian hope became deeply ingrained in us, while the churches, according to my father, "reduced a majestic faith to petty proportions, to lobbying in the courts of the Almighty for special favors," using it rather transparently as a pious ideological weapon in the interests of class and nation, or as "an easy escape from the vexatious issues of the day," behaving so childishly that they compared quite "unfavorably with the adolescent simplicities of the secular utopians of yesterday."

However debased or compromised, a true religious community, however—and we must remember this—must do two things simultaneously. It has to be relevant and supportive for its members in their daily lives, or else there is no reason for it to exist, frankly. At the same time, it must maintain a critical distance from secular life, and remind its members of the imperishable transcendent values and norms that faith commands them to heed. Every great religion sets forth these absolute commands, and its believers must try to obey them and relate them to the exigent demands of life in secular society as well.

The great danger, as any well-trained Niebuhrian can tell you, is the intrusion of these absolute ideals into what is necessarily the proximate compromised life of politics. But we shouldn't forget the flip side, too: the simple failure to live up to the ideals is a well-known phenomenon in every known society.

The Niebuhrian critique of American churches was that they lost their balance in this dual enterprise. All too often, they either capitulated to the gods of secular culture, to trendy modern commerce and entertainment, to the market, and made themselves over into chummy self-help centers and community social halls, feel-good pseudo-psychotherapeutic rallying points for visiting politicians, snake-oil salesmen, and their own revenue streams—as one bigwig who was at the National Cathedral last week

put it, I noticed—or else they retreated into a defiant authoritarian mode that rejected the modern world, with its science, its skepticism, its rationality, and its freedom, declaring themselves possessed of a higher truth unavailable to others.

One part of the church—now, here I'm quoting Niebuhr writing at the time of [the Scopes trial](#)—one part of the church "maintained an effective contact with modern culture, but stood in danger of capitulating to all the characteristic prejudices of a scientific and progressive age," while another part of the church "concerned with the evangelical heritage, chose to protect itself in the armor of a rigorous Biblicism."

I don't think Niebuhr anticipated the cultural development that offers us televised multimillion-dollar megachurches that do both of these things at once, but I don't think it would have surprised him. The pastors of churches like this are what he would have called—did call, following Jeremiah—false prophets, promising false security. They all too often avoid—[Billy Graham](#) does, [Jerry Falwell](#) does, as do [Pat Robertson](#) and [Rick Warren](#) do—they avoid or ignore the biggest issues threatening people's safety and freedom. They do nothing, to quote Niebuhr again, about "the brutalities of economic conflict, the disillusioning realities of international relations, the monstrous avarice of nations, the arrogance of races."

The convenient salesman of cheap religiosity offers instead gestures of reassurance, hands-on-the-shoulder friendship, what the novelist [Amos Oz](#) calls "ethical kitsch." But they fail to engage with the powers that create insecurity, and they seem powerless themselves to help when things go badly wrong, which is exactly when they are supposed to be of most help.

President Bush, in my mind, gave perfect expression to this specious public religion just a few days ago, when he went to Louisiana [after [Hurricane Katrina](#)] and then, afterwards at the National Cathedral, spoke of the terrible situation there: "Through prayer, we look for ways to understand the arbitrary harm left by this storm and the mystery of undeserved suffering. And in our search, we are reminded that God's purposes are sometimes impossible to know here on earth. Yet even as we're humbled by forces we cannot explain, we take comfort in the knowledge that no one is ever stranded beyond God's care. The creator of wind and water is also the source of an even greater power, a love that can redeem the worst tragedy, a love that is stronger than death."

His entire speech focused on this theme, that God's love can inspire us to overcome the tragedy of the hurricane. This message may go down well with the faith-based organizations on the Gulf Coast that are going to benefit from federal funds assigned to them, but the president said nothing about whether his administration had advanced policies treating all Americans, whatever their affiliation, with equal respect and love, which is the harder but truer government task and his Christian duty. He said nothing about the brutalities of economic conflict or the arrogance of races, you will note, let alone what his administration might do about them.

What are we to think? A skeptical, despairing, and completely atheistic friend of mine said to me during the last presidential campaign, "I'm sick of these politicians who keep telling me they're Christian. If they're so Christian, why don't they run on a platform that includes [the Beatitudes](#)?" Where are the public figures who hunger and thirst after righteousness, who respect the poor, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the persecuted? Where are the politicians that do something about these people? How about the peacemakers? Blessed be the peacemakers. Where might they be found?

We do know the public Christian figures disagree, as their churches do, about how to live the Christian life, about how to think about war and peace, about the death penalty, about a woman's pregnancy, about school prayer, and so on. But meanwhile the discrepancy between their announced principles and their actual behavior has become ludicrously big.

Obviously, there are millions of genuinely devout Americans. My point is simply that their practice, as Buddhists call it, making the daily effort to understand and live their faith, to recognize its impossible demands, and to welcome them as a discipline of the heart—this is what distinguishes the genuine religious life. The index is not in frequent public assertions of religious allegiance or affiliation or the way you answer questions on a Pew poll. This often unspoken effort, all the more real for its innerness, is bound to affect a person's life—and, I would like to go on to insist, professional life, political involvement.

It cannot be convincingly argued that religion can be partitioned off as a private matter that has nothing to do with a person's public comportment.

The nuanced difficulties of reconciling religious conduct with good citizenry in a secular republic will never be resolved unless we give them their due to start with. I think that's the Niebuhrian position, frankly. The defenders of the secular principles of the American government—and I would like to count myself among them—have in recent decades resorted to this dead-end logic about keeping religion private and not letting it into public life, about making the wall between church and state be also a wall between private religion and public politics.

But this is a sad development, I believe, for which blame must be apportioned on all sides. Blame on the one hand for the preachers who neglect the inner practice of their faith in favor of loud public announcements that alienate any decent citizen, and on the other hand, for the mass culture's general illiteracy about religion. This has tangled up many a foreign-policy problem, too.

I think I know what my father was talking about when years ago he deplored what he saw as the increasing secularization of American life, as well as the hostility and indifference to or ignorance of the religious imagination. But he didn't know the half of it. Look at us now. You don't have to be a conservative home-schooler to find American culture today - in our malls, movie houses, and megachurches, on the television screens, the Internet, the highway billboards and stadiums along the streets—just astonishingly given over to the worship of Mammon. Unbridled free-market, capitalist, corporate interests define, shape, color, and fill Americans' public spaces. It's one of the most notable things about our country, as any European or Asian will tell you. As my father often said, we deliberately but covertly made this happen. You don't have to be [Lord Acton](#), either, to observe that the greater the power of the corporation, the greater its corruption. (I didn't know I was going to talk on the day that [Kozlowski](#) went to jail.) This subject has gigantic international implications, but the fundamentalists now newly active on the foreign-policy scene are significantly silent on this issue.

Niebuhr's critique of the churches in our society, as well as America's secular, utopian, breezy self-centeredness, was made at a time when the United States was first becoming the most powerful democratic polity on earth and when it hadn't quite learned how yet to behave on the world scene. Our own national character was but recently formed and still inchoate. We didn't have the habits of global leadership. We had a welter of social and economic woes about which we equivocated, the most disgraceful of which was the white majority's horrific treatment of African Americans. We paid only lip service to the ideals of freedom and social justice, and our culture was schizophrenic on the subject of power, which we counted, and count, in the coin of commerce and finance, but whose actual manifestations we sentimentally hide from view. This being our nature, we wielded our power globally in forms that were essentially covert.

"How could such a nation act effectively in the world?" Niebuhr asked. I think the question must still be asked.

Now I'm giving a longer quote from what Joel has already said: "Nations are hardly capable of the spirit of forgiveness, which is the final oil of harmony in all human relations," my father wrote in 1952. "Yet," he continued, "it is necessary to acquire a measure of this spirit in the collective relations of mankind. Otherwise"—I like this formulation—"either we will seek escape from responsibilities that involve unavoidable guilt or we will be plunged into avoidable guilt by too great a confidence in our own virtue."

Today most Americans agree that, in truth, our nation has been plunged into avoidable guilt, and not because we as a people had too great a confidence in our own virtue, but because the present administration had too great a confidence in its own virtue and chose to enact policies that put the American people at risk in ways that they did not anticipate, favor, or vote into being. We got the government we deserve, however, but we must recognize the weakness at the heart of all this. Habitual self-congratulatory pride, certainty of virtue, ignorance, and demonization of the opponent—all of these things are weaknesses, in the end.

It was Niebuhr's additional point that we cannot escape the ironic dilemma at the center of our nation's

experience, as in the experience of all nations, that our own interests and passions invariably corrupt the justice whereby we claim our exercise of power is legitimated. Our very virtues, our famously open and democratic values, can thereby become the source of incompetence, political failure, and vice. These ironic weaknesses are just like those that have led all imperial adventures to their downfall. There are no exceptions in the whole long, glorious, and bloody history of mankind.

We know, too, that the most dangerous and most deluded imperial adventures are the ones animated by religious zeal. There is nothing more corrupt, my father thought, than a corrupt religion. So he would have plenty to talk about today, because corrupt zealotry stalks the world, not only in the Middle East, but in our own country, and there is corrupt state zealotry, as well as the private madness of terrorist foes.

Liberal church people have been long acquainted with the mindset of the fundamentalist evangelical right wing, that voter base essential to President Bush's political power and never, ever neglected by the tireless Karl Rove. For the liberal church people, the reasoning behind the black-white policies that brought us first the bombing of Afghanistan and then the Iraq war, the failed response to Hurricane Katrina, along with the evasive rhetoric concerning it that I've already quoted, the squalid drama of politicians rushing to [the Terri Schiavo case](#), the on-again/off-again flashing amber lights given about Darfur or AIDS or China's human-rights record, the Kyoto Accord —these are not so difficult to decipher for them.

But the American press and media, secularists uneducated in the language of religious zealotry, have seemed, until recently, unable to interpret the signals. Hence, the public at large has been slow to grasp that an entirely new way of construing the old religion-and-politics conundrum is transforming our landscape. What has been put in place is the scaffolding for a religious imperium, fueled by American wealth, claiming the old American secular tradition, but animated by a new kind of radical extremist zeal. It features churches and congregations that in the past were perennially aggrieved to be denied the opportunity to snuffle at the public trough of federal money. But that's now being changed.

It also features a network of radical eggheads and lawyers who truly believe that government is established not by men and women, but by God, and that the sooner we acknowledge this, the better. Justice Scalia is of this persuasion. Countless evangelical pastors and countless politicians insist not only on the divine source of government, but specifically on God's anointment of George Bush as president.

I'm not exaggerating.

Then there are the, let's call them, neoconservatives, who espouse a scarily simple notion of the American obligation to protect the Holy Land against the infidel, as well as to export our values, whatever they may be, across the globe. These wildly disparate forces seem to mesh nicely with the old Republican financial base of corporate business intent on maximizing American power at home and abroad, though the businessmen may know little and care less about the religious agenda animating the whole.

The simplistic Manichean terms of this new American imperium are now well-known to us. For some years, President Bush has asserted that the United States is involved in a war—a crusade even, he called it, until he was told not to— against evil, that Americans are the army of light waging battles against the forces of darkness. This pleases the evangelical fundamentalists who form the base of his political support. They congregate in churches with a long record of isolationist hostility to the world and ignorance of international relations. They, like the business and corporate K Street people [lobbyists], who work the other side of the street, evidently do not know that a proclaimed confidence in America's virtue is exactly the feature of our conduct that has most alienated our friends, frustrated our allies, and given strength and wily confidence to our enemies.

The religious agenda of many new players in the foreign-policy game today is a cherry-picked one. Nowhere is the hypocrisy of faith more evident than in the single-issue concerns that now characterize the international programs of many faith-based groups. True, the old liberal Protestant churches made fatal mistakes in the 1960s and 1970s, when they neglected their overarching themes to which they had always been devoted—the causes of social justice and economic equality, the obligation to address issues

that give rise to war and conflict, as Andrew Carnegie cared about, to work tirelessly for peace—when they neglected some of these themes and, themselves, cherry-picked others. But that's nothing compared to the narrow selection of issues going on now.

In an anthology of essays about faith and foreign policy that I consulted recently—in preparation for this talk, actually—I discovered that its authors were mostly interested in the Russian oppression of Pentecostals and Jews, China's persecution of Catholics, Sudan's toleration of the enslavement of its Christian citizens, Israel's allegedly plausible need to settle the West Bank with Jews who believe it to be their Promised Land, the dilemma of whether or not to have condoms recommended in the battle against AIDS in Africa, the just-war theory and defense of preemptive action in Iraq.

This is not a coherent assessment of the issues of faith in foreign policy. It just isn't. Nothing was said, for example, of the Vatican's opposition to the war in Iraq, any more than the pope's opposition to the death penalty. Nothing was said about any ethic of reliability, trust, or consistency in American or other diplomacy. The substance of the book, in fact, had nothing to do with religion. It was simply a laundry list of special interests dear to the heart of the strangely assorted forces in charge of our government.

To push hard on these issues one by one in the name of one's faith is already a pretty questionable procedure, in my view, but to do so while insisting on the decency of your motives and the nobility of America's intentions is folly. And to make such assertions with the usual American tone of innocent belligerency—this was bad enough when our country was young and relatively weak, but now, with our unparalleled wealth and military power, it goes beyond folly to danger.

It isn't only the events of the past weeks on the Gulf Coast, but a whole train of Niebuhrian habits that has made me leave this foreign-policy gallimaufry to the end of my comments, when, perhaps, you anticipated and deserved that I would spend more time on specific policy matters. But if I've learned anything about the Niebuhr way of thinking about foreign affairs, it is that one must always, always relate it to the domestic life of the nation. It is implicit in virtually everything my father wrote on the subject that there is little point in having a foreign policy or an arms policy unless, as a nation, you know who you are, what sort of a nation you imagine yourself to be. I don't mean in the narrow sense of an instrumentally calculated national interest, but in the larger spiritual and cultural sense.

His constant sorrow was that American political leaders all too often imagined a diminished America and presented it falsely, that they themselves were stupider and prouder and more self-righteous, more moralistic and more vainglorious than the American people on whose behalf they spoke. He thought the victorious politicians at the polls who then disregarded America's intractable economic and political problems were betraying the American people who cared to have those problems addressed. You couldn't expect that foreign policy from such people would be anything but bankrupt if there was a paucity of courage and resourcefulness on the domestic front.

Iraq and Mississippi are definitely connected, and not just by the brave young people from the one who are being made to stand vigil in the other, where their comrades in arms are now stretched so thin that there is no allowance for compassionate leave to return to the Delta and assist their ravished families.

Lives, as well as vital economic and social links, connect international issues and domestic priorities, and they should never be severed.

That is why I think we must recognize that what's behind the unlikely coalition of powers directing American foreign policy today is not a shared view of what America should be doing in the world, beyond making money. I think, rather, it's a shared view about what America should be like here at home. It's a shared antipathy to the progressive social intentions of [the New Deal](#) and [the Great Society](#), and the generous internationalism that was Roosevelt's great legacy, living on after the war with [the Marshall Plan](#) and the founding of the United Nations, and well into the extraordinary prosperity and peace of the Eisenhower years.

When the extreme right wing of the evangelical churches, together with the white Southerners and Westerners of the Republican Party, who are the true inheritors of the Dixiecrats, forged an opportunistic

alliance over the hot-button issues of abortion, gay marriage, and support for the Sharon government, for example, these issues are standing in for the larger ones of women's rights, the extension of civil rights to persons of whom one may disapprove, and a foreign policy that engages fully in the new contours of the Middle East—all these things, plus a shared antipathy to the cause of racial integration.

Meanwhile, on another plane, neither this government nor the religious groups supporting it have done anything to address the most dangerous international issue of all. For all the terrorizing talk about WMD [Weapons of Mass Destruction], we have no known policy on nuclear weapons—I mean our own weapons and those of our allies, as well as those of our enemies.

Have we already forgotten that our own use of these transformed every known ethic of war and peace? The force of atomic explosions and the unearthly evil of their poisonous aftereffects changed the very structure of the international order. If ever there was an issue that deserves the consideration of faith-based people, this is it. But silence reigns.

Most days, I find—except when I'm coming to the Carnegie—I arise in despair and I spend the hours horror-struck and dismayed. But that won't do. As my father said even when he was at his most melancholic, we must persevere. We really have no choice. We must confront new forces that endanger our democratic freedoms—the suppression of criticism, dissent, opposition, or even inquiry, the distractions of our noisy culture, the uncontrolled temptations and powers of computerized cyberspace, the downgrading of public leadership. We must battle our own moral and spiritual weaknesses—our hubris, vanity, and complacency. And we must do this both at home and abroad, with as much political sensitivity and hardheaded realism as we can muster.

I suppose we shall probably never have enough courage to change what must be changed. The grace to accept with serenity that which cannot be changed will never come easily to us. And the wisdom to discern the one from the other takes more than our lifetime to acquire.

Thank you.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Thank you for that wonderful, comprehensive stem-winding talk. I really appreciate your invoking the first principles of a Niebuhrian legacy. It's really sort of an Archimedean point for the Carnegie Council and its work. It's wonderful to have you give that talk here, in this place.

I am sure that there are questions and comments. We would welcome them from you.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: When you were reciting the various litanies of errors of the Bush administration, you mentioned their support of a Sharon government. I'm sure you are aware of the fact that your father was a very strong supporter of Israel, at least in the 1950s and 1960s. How do you distinguish his support of Israel and Zionism from what the current administration is doing with respect to the Sharon regime?

ELISABETH SIFTON: Thank you for that question. Yes, my father was a very strong supporter of Israel, not only in the 1950s and 1960s, but actually in the 1940s. He testified before Congress in 1942, before there even was an Israel, in favor of the idea, then not at all in vogue, that there should be such a thing. I am trying to remember if I talked to him ever, in the years just before his death, about the consequences of Israel's victory in the 1967 war.

But I, like many Israelis, feel that the definition of a state and the nature of its purposes in the occupying territories fatally changed and altered the sense of Israel's self-hood, and statehood. The moral and diplomatic and military and human consequences of the continued occupation of the occupied territories, to me, is not—I told you that I'm not going to guess what my father would have said about this. But for me, trained at his heels, I find this not something that one can readily assent to, as one did in 1948, to the support of the Israeli state—which, by the way, even then, he insisted, would only work if due attention was paid to the needs of Arabs in Palestine, about which he wasn't sure [Weizmann](#) was being

honest about the numbers being displaced and so on. So from the beginning, he worried about this.

But 1967 changes a lot, and 1972 even more. So that explains why for me, the idea of unqualified support for the Likud position on post-1967 Israel doesn't necessarily follow from support of Israel from 1948 to 1967.

QUESTION: I'm so happy to be here. I consider myself a Niebuhrian and in considering myself one, keep asking myself what to do. But being extremely frustrated in what I see in American policy, American domestic policy, American foreign policy, American official use and abuse of religion, I have to admit, that mostly I feel tragic about the whole thing, more than I feel like I know what to do. I'm not saying you should know, but I feel that somehow or other, this conversation has to begin, because there are a lot of very frustrated people. Yes, I do think your father does have something to teach us, but I want it to be towards action and not towards a sense of tragic loss.

ELISABETH SIFTON: Right. My own experience just in the past few years, and since my book was published, which gave me an opportunity to visit with people who asked me to come and talk about it, was to change my position on the question that Joel asked at the beginning: Where is a Niebuhr today? Why isn't there somebody like a Niebuhr today? There are lots of people. There are lots and lots of people who take, roughly speaking, the Niebuhrian position on faith and politics, on religion and foreign policy. There are many, many of them. Many of them are articulate and passionate, but they are not being listened to by the wildly, I think, secular media, who pay no attention to them.

My father had the great good luck to be listened to by *Life* and *Time*, for reasons that he found kind of funny. [Henry Luce](#) admired him, which embarrassed him greatly, because he didn't agree with Luce about a lot of things. But magazines opened their pages to him, and he was read about and he was read by lots and lots of Americans.

The equivalent figures now may be out there, but the networks and the major newspapers are not looking for them.

I, for example, have noticed that whenever there's a big crisis about some faith issue, the reporters who have to cover it go to find a rabbi, a priest, and Jerry Falwell or some other evangelical. They never ask for a liberal Protestant. They're quite comfortable about writing about the decline and fall of Methodism and Episcopalianism. But they are hastening it by, themselves, ignoring an actually quite lively and vibrant religious community in this country.

Many of the people who espouse the sort of Niebuhrian position feel now, as he did then, embattled and alone. People now think that everybody listened to my father, and people really cared about him. But the fact is—I have to remind people of this—he was never asked to preach in almost any American churches. The reason lots of people heard his sermons was that he went to a number of colleges, where he would sort of ride circuit. So lots of people, as college students, heard his sermons and got excited by them. But I can count on the fingers of one deformed hand the churches in America who wanted to have him in their pulpit, because they disapproved of him. He was making trouble. He was rocking the boat. He was calling into question some of their most cherished banalities. They didn't like him.

So it's not as if he was sort of a commanding leader of the American church. Far from it. Far from it.

He had a great friend towards the end of his life in [Rabbi Abraham Heschel](#), who had a similar position in Jewish thought. He's now revered as one of the great rabbis, but at the time, in the 1950s, and when he went to Selma to march for [Martin Luther King](#), the rabbinate of New York City was not pleased. So we are coating the memory of a big voice, like Heschel's or my father's, with a certain amount of historical nostalgia, because, in fact, they were embattled minorities then.

There are still lots of people with this view. But as I say, I don't think the megaphone of mass media pays much attention to them, and I don't think they're heard.

They, themselves, of course, get up every morning and shoot themselves in the foot, the way we all do. They may not be getting the message quite right or whatever. They certainly haven't planned a political

campaign with the ruthlessness that the evangelical right wing has. There's no question of that.

But then they are not after political power in the way that these other churches are. I hope I made that clear. The reason that the evangelical right wing is so well-organized, the reason they have 10 million names on email and Karl Rove just has to punch it—it's because they seek political power. But the Niebuhrian position recommends that you not do that, that there are other kinds of power and there are other kinds of influence that religious figures should have, not the actual possession of political power at the ballot box. So that not being their aim, they don't organize themselves in quite the same way.

I don't know if I'm answering your question. But I do think that there are action-oriented people who are thinking about specific issues. They are thinking about specific problems, specific social issues, and they're addressing them in their congregations and from their pulpits and in their newsletters. I think they are there. I really do.

QUESTION: You tended to gloss over it in your speech, but to what do you attribute the current religious awakening?

ELISABETH SIFTON: I didn't mean to gloss it over. I think in times of hectic anxiety and difficulty, people clutch at straws. I think much of the religion that is now being advocated as a source of reassurance and hope is, in fact, made of straw. I don't think it has the power and the depth of true religious convictions. But, certainly, in times of tumult and trouble, people look for easy reassurances. We live in a grotesquely difficult world, and it's changing every day. It's so hard that you want to have some keel on which to build your vessel, and people look for that, I guess.

The rise of extremist hysterical religions is another question. That has to do with politics and the canny political use of mass media. Do you agree?

QUESTIONER: Yes.

QUESTION: How does a Niebuhrian feel about war? Do they categorize war into good wars and bad wars, or do they believe in turning the other cheek?

ELISABETH SIFTON: My father was for many years a pacifist. Probably in 1915, he was still a pacifist, when he wrote for the Carnegie. He may have had absolutist positions about the ways in which to resolve international conflict, but they certainly never went anywhere near war. He shared with his generation of pastors, as well as lay people, an absolute abhorrence of war after the catastrophe of 1914-1918. It seemed inconceivable that civilized people would even dream that armed conflict was a way to resolve anything, after the tens of millions of deaths of four slogging, horrible years of carnage—an unspeakable idea. So he very strongly worked on behalf of pacifist positions, and was one of the chairmen of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which was a well-known Quaker pacifist group.

But in the course of the 1930s, he changed his position on this. He changed his position because he felt that it was quite clear, as he watched what Germany and Italy were doing in Western Europe, that there was no way to stop them without the use of force. There can't ever be a complacent or happy acknowledgement of the necessity of this, but on the other hand, he argued strongly all through—and he was very much an interventionist in 1937 to 1941, when most American churches were isolationist and pacifist—he argued in favor of intervention in the war in Europe, on the grounds that just because you claim you're a Christian and you want to turn the other cheek does not mean that you have the luxury of avoiding the possibility that your civilization is going to be destroyed; the very civilization that allows you to think about pacifism is going to be snuffed out unless steps are taken to prevent this annihilation by force.

So with tremendous reluctance, he argued that force should be used against...

QUESTIONER: [Inaudible]

ELISABETH SIFTON: I, myself, as his daughter, feel it's inconceivable that he would favor the Iraq War. He did not favor the Vietnam War. He was only reluctantly conceding the necessity of the Korean War, and

then only because it was done multilaterally and with the Security Council behind it, and every single diplomatic step was taken before arms were raised.

But there's not a shred in any of his writing that suggests that he ever thought preemptive war made any sense, let alone preemptive war on spurious and concocted grounds. He was extremely ill-at-ease with the idea that Americans could easily go into any part of the world and kind of fix things up—leaving conflict aside, leaving war aside, just marching in there for any reason and fixing things up, because we're Americans and we're a can-do people. No, no, no. Certainly, the hideous political complexities of the Middle East hardly recommend an easy military solution, when diplomacy has scarcely been tried.

I hazard that.

QUESTION: One point, first of all. I've been in the media, which now I consider to be a pejorative term, by the way—it used to be called journalism—for forty years. I think one answer to your point about that is that we have seen an exponential speeding-up of reporting, technology, business, and all the other elements that go into the media. It leaves no time for anything; for reaction, as opposed to reflection.

I was in Europe last week, and someone talked about the movie, [The Truman Show](#). Hurricane Katrina, in a way, ripped the outer wall of what we have been living in as *The Truman Show*. These principles that you're talking about, I think, probably did express themselves with the moderate core of this country. Do you feel that's the case?

ELISABETH SIFTON: Yes, I do. I think also that we're learning how to read public events in a different way. We now read them visually and quickly rather than in print and slowly, as we used to. If you find up in your attic somewhere old issues of *Life* or *Time*, you'd be amazed at how long the articles are and how detailed the analyses offered are—I'm supporting your view here—how comprehensive. This was mass media. These were mass journalism papers, written for ordinary people. This was not *The New York Review of Books*.

I speak as a publisher now, too. I know the reading spans have collapsed. People don't read so much anymore, and people, I think, absorb now information about public affairs much more visually, because of television, than they used to. Possibly there is some value to that. There are some things that pictures do make very clear, and other things that they, of course, famously obscure.

But I agree with your assessment about this. I also think that you see the consequences of the drive to the bottom line more and more in the way the mass media conduct themselves.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: Perhaps here at the Carnegie Council, we can be a little bit countercultural and create a space for reflection, mutual learning, talking.

Thank you so much for leading this discussion.

ELISABETH SIFTON: Thank you, Joel.

JOEL ROSENTHAL: I know that you didn't want to channel the legacy of your father, but you've really provided a great service to us in giving us access to some of this information.

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