

T W O

## POLITICAL REALISM: THE CHALLENGE TO MORALITY IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

What the devil do you mean, morality?—word of honor? Sure, you can talk about word of honor when you promise to deliver goods in business.—But when it is the question of the interests of the nation!? . . . Then morality stops!

—Herman Goering

There are only actions by individuals acting as agents for the state, for which they are fully responsible; they therefore cannot excuse what they have done by claiming that reasons of state made it essential; the state can provide no cover for the actions of an individual.

—Helmuth von Moltke<sup>1</sup>

Political realism has a certain initial appeal. If, as one analyst writes, *Realpolitik* is "the only creed appropriate to the conduct of foreign relations," then power politics "is the only game in town. The only choice open to the United States is between playing it effectively or ineffectively."<sup>2</sup> Playing it effectively calls up images

<sup>1</sup> Goering is quoted by prison psychologist G. M. Gilbert from an interview during his imprisonment and trial at Nuremberg. See *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: The New American Library, 1947), p. 339. Helmuth von Moltke was a leader of the German Kreisau Circle that opposed Hitler. He was executed by the Nazis near the end of the war. The quotation comes from documents published by Ger van Roon in *German Resistance to Hitler: Count von Moltke and the Kreisau Circle* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1971), p. 316.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Gray, "Foreign Policy—There Is No Choice," *Foreign Policy* 24 (Fall 1976): 120. In a similar though less approving vein, Stanley Hoffmann writes that "[t]he drama of international politics is that there is, as of now, no generally accepted alternative to Machiavellian statecraft." See *Duties Beyond Borders* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981), p. 24. Kenneth W. Thompson represents the Nixon-Kissinger foreign policy as one of *Realpolitik* in *Morality and Foreign Policy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 26. For discussions of the dominance of political realism in American foreign policy, see Robert L. Rothstein, "On the Costs of Political Realism," *American Political Science Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Sept.

of decisive, no-nonsense men making hard decisions in the "real world"—men of the sort, we like to think, who won the West and made America great. And it is men like this, the thinking goes, who know how to deal with America's enemies. Unburdened by sentimentality, they know how to wield power, and power, they say, is the only language the Communists understand. They desire peace as much as anyone else, we are assured. But it is the peace that derives from strength, from commanding respect in the world's corridors of power. Morality, according to this view, has reserved for it the "unobtrusive, almost feminine, function of the gentle civilizer of national self-interest."<sup>3</sup>

Though not always held in quite so naïve a form as this, political realism has been the most influential outlook on international affairs in twentieth-century American thought, with adherents among leading theologians, historians, diplomats, strategists, and political scientists. These include Reinhold Niebuhr, George Kennan, Hans Morgenthau, Robert Osgood, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Henry Kissinger.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as I shall point out, much of American foreign policy during the post-World War II period has conformed to realist prescriptions. But if this approach is correct, it vitiates the whole enterprise of trying to give a moral evaluation of war. If there is something wrongheaded about making moral judgments about the conduct of nations, then *a fortiori* there is something wrongheaded about trying to assess the conduct of states in going to war.

1972): 347-362, and Louis Rene Beres, *Reason and Realpolitik: U.S. Foreign Policy and World Order* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1984). George Kennan's views on this matter can be found principally in his *American Diplomacy, 1909-1950* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), and "Morality and Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs* 64, no. 3 (Winter 1985/86): 205-218. For a philosophical critique of the realist approach, see Marshall Cohen, "Moral Skepticism and International Relations," in *International Ethics*, ed. C. Beitz et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 3-53.

<sup>3</sup> George Kennan, *American Diplomacy*, p. 54. The association of morality with feminine weakness and "realism" with masculine virility runs through much of the writing on international relations, as though there were tacit agreement with Heinrich von Treitschke that "[t]he features of history are virile, unsuited to sentimental or feminine natures." See Hans Kohn, ed., *Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1963), p. 13. For a good study of this phenomenon, particularly in literature, see Lucy Korman's "Violence and the Masculine Mystique," *Washington Monthly* 2, no. 5 (July 1970).

<sup>4</sup> While not usually identified with political realism, Schlesinger defends what is in effect a realist position in his "The Necessary Amoralism of Foreign Affairs," *Hopfer's Magazine*, August 1971, and "National Interests and Moral Absolutes," in *Ethics and World Politics: Four Perspectives*, ed. Ernest W. Lefever (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), pp. 21-42.

The source of the philosophical problem is not hard to locate. When one compares the conduct of states with that of individuals, the discrepancy between the two stands out. Virtually everything deemed reprehensible in conduct among individuals is widely practiced among states. It was this that led Woodrow Wilson to proclaim hopefully in 1917 that "[w]e are at the beginning of an age in which it will be insisted that the same standards of conduct and responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states."<sup>4</sup>

Few share such optimism today. But to take morality seriously one must either reject the accepted standards of conduct among nations—with all that implies for the conduct of foreign affairs and the waging of war—or show that they are justifiable. Most have tried to show that they are justifiable.<sup>5</sup> But if they cannot be justified by the standards holding among individuals, then one must either recognize two moralities—one applying to the conduct of individuals, the other to that of states—or try to detach morality altogether from the conduct of states.

Only the second alternative strictly represents political realism. But both are closely bound up with political realist analyses, and both have roots in antiquity.

When Thucydides depicts the Athenians' address to the Lacedaemonian assembly before the Peloponnesian War, he captures an important strand in this thinking. Responding to accusations of imperialism, the Athenians contend that the weak have always been subject to the strong. "Besides," they add, "we believed ourselves to be worthy of our position, and so you thought us till now, when calculations of interest have made you take up the cry of justice—a consideration which no one ever yet brought forward to hinder his ambition when he had a chance of gaining anything by might."<sup>6</sup>

The thought here is that appeals to justice—and by extension, we may suppose, to morality in general—are simply embroidery to the claims of self-interest. Morality and self-interest are as-

<sup>4</sup> *The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (New York: The Review of Reviews Corporation, 1924), 1: 378.

<sup>5</sup> Machiavelli is often thought to be an exception, but he can be read as maintaining that state policy has a justification by norms other than those bound up in the morality that holds among individuals.

<sup>6</sup> *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, rev. R. C. Feitham (Avon, Conn.: The Clarendon Press, 1974), 1: 41.

sumed to be distinct, with the one subservient to the other. When pushed to its limit this way of thinking not only relegates morality to a subsidiary position in international affairs; it eliminates it altogether. As Hobbes later argued, sovereign states have no authority above them, and morality requires such authority. Therefore morality cannot exist at the international level. Nations exist in a state of nature where self-preservation alone is the rule.

There is another closely related line of thought, however, with which this one is sometimes confused. Though suggested by the passage from Thucydides, it receives its clearest classical expression in the person of Callicles in Plato's dialogue the *Gorgias*.

Callicles, like the Athenians, says there that the weak are subject to the strong. But he extends this claim to the whole of nature, the animal kingdom as well as societies. He then makes explicit what is only implicit in the Athenians' speech, which is that this is the way things *ought* to be. It is "natural justice" that the strong rule over the weak. He thus elevates the alleged fact to which the Athenians appeal to the status of a principle of morality.<sup>7</sup> The weak, however, have their own devices, according to Callicles. They create laws and conventions as a means of holding down the strong.<sup>8</sup> They foster the idea that equality should be prized and that it is worse to do evil than to suffer it. Since the weak are in the majority, this has a levelling effect; those who would by nature prevail through superior strength and intelligence become caught up in the net of social values and customs. Being themselves taught from childhood that one should not do evil or seek advantage over others, their natural self-assertiveness is undermined. A distinction thus emerges between what is right by "convention"—that is, according to the norms created by society—and what is right by "nature." A doctrine of two moralities comes into being.<sup>9</sup>

There are, then, two parts to Callicles' position. The first, embodied in the principle that the strong should dominate the weak, implies that might makes right and lays the foundation for *Macht-*

<sup>7</sup> In so doing he makes the first commission of the naturalistic fallacy in Western thought—the inference from the fact that things are a certain way in nature to the conclusion that that is the way they ought to be.

<sup>8</sup> It is this part of Callicles' position that is taken up by Nietzsche in his account of slave morality, except that with the benefit of historical perspective, Nietzsche adds to Callicles' list such virtues as sympathy, compassion, obedience, and self-sacrifice—virtues of historically oppressed peoples like Christians and Jews.

<sup>9</sup> It is possible to read Callicles as arguing not so much for the recognition of two moralities as for the transcendence of morality to something beyond it. In that case the label "natural justice" which he attaches to his basic principle would not actually designate a moral principle, though it would still be normative.

politik.<sup>10</sup> If strength consists of physical power, and it is the strong who should prevail, then the way to be in the right is to acquire power and exercise it over others. This is assumed by Plato's Thrasymachus and comes down to us through Social Darwinism to Hitler and twentieth-century fascism.<sup>11</sup> The second, the distinction between conventional and natural morality, becomes transmuted in subsequent thought into two closely related distinctions that also are easily confused with one another. These are between public and private morality, on the one hand, and individual and collective morality, on the other.

Private morality supposedly governs the conduct of individuals in their personal relations with one another, public morality their conduct in government, business, or public life. Predictably, the two seem often to conflict. Machiavelli noted this when he observed that the prince "cannot possibly exercise all those virtues for which men are called 'good.' To preserve the state, he often has to do things against his word, against charity, against humanity, against religion."<sup>12</sup> Although Machiavelli is often thought to be condoning immorality here, a more charitable reading is that he thinks the prince should simply transcend private morality—comprising the virtues of charity, humanity, and so on that, in defining what is "considered" good, are a form of conventional morality in Calicles' sense—in favor of public morality. Because the standards of private conduct are inadequate to the responsibilities of a leader, one must be guided by other norms, even if that sometimes means performing acts which violate the tenets of private morality.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Calicles' principle of natural justice implies that might makes right if one understands the strong to be those who in fact dominate by nature. It does not necessarily do so otherwise.

<sup>11</sup> As the German General F. von Bernhardi wrote shortly before World War I: "Might is at once the supreme right, and the dispute as to what is right is decided by the arbitrament of war. War gives a biologically just decision, since its decision rests on the very nature of things." See *Germany and the Next War*, trans. Allen H. Powles (New York: Longmans, Green, & Company, 1914), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Robert M. Adams, ed. and trans., *The Prince* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977), pp. 50-51.

<sup>13</sup> Although in Machiavelli the public morality of the prince is governed by principles very much like Calicles' natural justice, subsequent writers do not all regard public morality in that way. Though they would not subscribe to the doctrine that might makes right, they nonetheless feel that when one serves in public office, or in positions of leadership in the military or the business world, the special relationships in which he stands to others not only permit but sometimes require different conduct from what one would engage in were one acting solely within the scope of private morality. See, for example, Stuart Hampshire, ed., *Public and Private Morality* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1978), and R. M. Hare, "Reason of

When one ceases to think of morality as governing only the conduct of individuals, the second distinction becomes relevant. For it speaks of individual morality in connection with the conduct of individuals—whether in the form of public or private morality—and of collective morality in connection with the conduct of groups.<sup>14</sup> The conduct of groups is thought to be sufficiently distinctive as to warrant postulating a unique set of norms for its guidance. Thus Heinrich von Treitschke, a nineteenth-century German historian, says that "the State is not to be judged by the standards which apply to individuals, but by those which are set for it by its own nature and ultimate aims."<sup>15</sup> He regarded this "nature" as moral and therefore as providing the framework for a higher morality.

What Machiavelli achieves by giving priority to the public morality of the prince over the private morality of the individual, Treitschke achieves by giving priority to the collective morality of the state over the conduct of individuals. Both give license to the violation of private morality, since both agree that the conduct of states should be judged by different standards than the conduct of individuals.

This Machiavellian thesis, as we may call it—that states should be governed by different standards than individuals—is subscribed to by contemporary political realists. Indeed, it is the denial of this thesis by Woodrow Wilson that provides the point of departure for many contemporary analyses. But unlike Treitschke, and in a grudging concession to Wilsonianism, many realists view the collective morality of states as inferior to the individual morality of persons. The very title of Reinhold Niebuhr's influential book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, reflects this. But for various reasons they nonetheless believe that it is unrealistic to try to govern foreign affairs by individual morality.

## II

These different strands of thought are woven throughout the analyses of realists and are part of the total fabric of contemporary po-

State," in *Applications of Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972).

<sup>14</sup> If the conduct of collectivities ultimately reduces to the conduct of individuals, particularly those in positions of leadership, then, of course, the distinction between individual and collective morality collapses back into the distinction between private and public morality. For then what passes for collective morality is simply the public morality of selected individuals.

<sup>15</sup> In Kohn, ed., *Politics*, p. 55.

litical realism. Often, however, the term "political realism" is used simply as a commendatory label, to stand for whatever is effective, clearheaded, and rational in foreign policy thinking—a sense in which no one in his right mind would admit to being anything but a realist.<sup>16</sup> Used in this way the term simply provides a means of trying to elicit favorable attitudes towards policies of which one approves and to foster negative attitudes towards those of which one disapproves. Policies of which one disapproves are called unrealistic or, worse yet, idealistic. The term "idealism" is then reserved for well-intentioned but impractical or fainthearted approaches to world problems—a sense in which no one in his right mind would admit to being an idealist. With one position thus having been defined in such a way as to have no willing defenders, the issue between idealism and realism becomes a pseudo-issue—useful perhaps for polemical purposes but performing no service in illuminating the place of morality in international affairs.

It is possible, however, to define these terms in a way that both accords with much of the theoretical work in foreign policy and highlights the underlying substantive issues.

What I shall call positivistic realism holds that morality has no application whatever to international relations. On this view one cannot intelligibly judge, for example, that a nation acted rightly or wrongly in going to war against another nation, any more than one can judge that nature acted rightly or wrongly in afflicting a people with a hurricane or earthquake. Moral concepts like "right" or "wrong" are simply inapplicable to such phenomena. In each case, as I pointed out in the Introduction, one can judge that what happened was good or bad—value terms are applicable to per-

<sup>16</sup> Speaking here of its use by advocates. Thus Robert E. Osgood, in his *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), says that "realism—with a small 'r'—is used in this book to refer to an accurate assessment of the ends and motives that determine the conduct of nations; it implies a disposition to perceive and act upon the real conditions under which a nation may achieve its ends in international society" (p. 16). See also J. W. Burton, *International Relations: A General Theory* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1963), p. 245. Critics, on the other hand, characterize it in equally uncompromising terms. Marxists, for example, represent it as functioning "to conceal by more subtle means than hitherto had been the case the threat to peace constituted by imperialism" and as "an apology for the use of violence as a means of halting socio-historical progress." See the study by Soviet philosophers, *Problems of War and Peace: A Critical Analysis of Bourgeois Theories*, trans. Bryan Bean (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), pp. 191, 198. For a good discussion of realism in connection with the nuclear arms race, see Conrad G. Brunk, "Realism, Deterrence, and the Nuclear Arms Race," in *Nuclear War: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. M. Fox and L. Groerke (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 223-239.

sons, objects, or phenomena of nature. But prescriptive terms like "right" and "wrong," which are at the heart of moral assessment, apply only to conduct, and in the view of the positivist they apply only to the conduct of individual persons.<sup>17</sup>

Normative realism, on the other hand, allows that one can intelligibly make moral judgments about international affairs but contends that one ought not to do so in conducting foreign policy. In its stronger form it denies that such notions should ever be appealed to in international relations. It allows that one can make sense of saying that this or that nation acted rightly or wrongly in the performance of a certain action but says we should refrain from making such judgments. In its weaker form, on the other hand, it concedes that morality is applicable to foreign affairs and should have some weight in decision making but denies that moral considerations should be decisive in the determination of policy. Where Machiavelli says that the prince should exhibit virtue when he can (and in any event should always give the appearance of being virtuous), the soft realist of this sort says that states should honor morality when they can. But both believe that when it is expedient to do so, morality should be abandoned.

By contrast, idealism can be defined simply as the view that states ought always to act morally. Now although political realism per se says nothing one way or the other about the nature of the state or about other normative principles that may be associated with it, it is typically bound up with one or the other of two further doctrines, reason of state and national egoism.

It has frequently been argued that the state is necessary for the promotion and maintenance of values, or at least the highest values. Plato held this, as did Augustine, at least so far as earthly goods are concerned; and it has been held by such a mixed group as Treitschke, Hegel, John Jay, and Mussolini. The twentieth-century British philosopher G. E. Moore expressly defends the companion thesis that society (as distinct from the state) is a precondition of the highest goods. It is, in any event, an easy step from this to conclude that the survival of the state comes before all else and that any means to that end are justified. This is the doctrine of reason of state, which finds ready support in the view that public morality should override private morality, since public morality

<sup>17</sup> This does not mean, we should note, that the positivist says that such events as wars are morally justified. To say that would imply that moral notions do apply to the conduct of states. He contends, rather, that wars are neither justified nor unjustified. The notion of moral justification is simply irrelevant.

may be thought to require that leaders put the survival of the state above all else. Whatever they might prefer to do in their private lives, national leaders are obligated to preserve the state. A rationale is thus provided not only for those who are willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of the state but also for those who are willing to sacrifice others as well.

One hears little about reason of state anymore. What one hears about is national interest, which, as usually conceived, encompasses national survival but much else besides. It prescribes the whole array of policies deemed essential to the state's prosperity, prestige, and honor in the world. In this sense national egoism—the doctrine that national self-interest should govern the conduct of the state—is a stronger thesis than reason of state. But both entail political realism. If the interest or survival of the state (and I shall use nation and state interchangeably unless otherwise indicated) is put above all else, and if any measures are deemed justified in promoting it, then one is committed to displacing morality either partially or wholly in the conduct of foreign affairs. Even if the interest of the state should always miraculously coincide with what is morally right, the coincidence would merely be a happy one, and it would still, on this view, be national interest that is the governing norm.

There are many forms that political realism may take, however, and it is important to distinguish them. It is said, for example, that nations in fact always act from self-interest. Even some who concede that states ought to do otherwise think that it is pointless to make such judgments in light of this fact.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes, however, this descriptive claim has underlying it the stronger thesis that nations necessarily act from self-interest. One might think, for example, that the very concept of a nation—or, as Hobbes and Clausewitz thought, the idea of a system of international relations—necessitates that states act self-interestedly. Or one might advance theological or metaphysical claims about the nature of man and the human condition, as Niebuhr does and Augustine did before him, that make it virtually impossible for nations to rise above egoistic considerations. Still further, one might try to show that acting upon moral considerations has worse consequences than does acting from self-interest—a line taken by Kennan and

<sup>18</sup> To be plausible this claim must be interpreted to mean that nations always do what they think is in their interest, since it is manifestly false that nations always do what is in fact in their interest. They frequently bring ruin and destruction upon themselves.

Schlesinger and that requires the defense of an array of historical, philosophical, and valuational judgments.

At still other times, however, one finds the different claim that, while nations do not always act from self-interest, they *ought* to do so. This normative thesis rejects both the descriptive and necessitarian theses. But it supports political realism in one or the other of its forms, so long as morality and self-interest do not necessarily coincide and the judgment that nations ought to act from self-interest is not itself a moral judgment.

Now normative realism has been the predominant form political realism has taken in American thought in the twentieth century. There are two strands to it, one primarily theoretical, the other historical. Although the two are often interwoven, it is important to distinguish them. I shall discuss primarily the historical version and comment on only one version of the theoretical approach, namely, the Niebuhrian view that appeals to the theological conception of the nature of man. We shall then look at some of the more recent forms realist thinking has taken.

### III

The historical approach focuses upon America's foreign policy during the first half of the twentieth century and alleges that that policy bore near-disastrous fruits between the two world wars.<sup>19</sup>

The problem according to this view has its roots in America's history of isolationism and reached a critical point in America's flirtation with global imperialism during the Spanish-American War. After seizing the Philippines, the United States discovered a distaste for this departure from its traditional stance and backed off from the beckoning role of world power. The belief that America would truly be a world power if only it would act like one has been the lament of realists ever since.

Whereas the older European nations were perceived as war-prone, corrupt, and committed to an immoral balance of power system of international politics, America thought of herself as principled and righteous, according to this view. Equally as important, she thought of herself as secure. The young Lincoln had proclaimed that "all the armies of Europe, Asia, and Africa com-

<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Osgood gives the most sustained analysis of this line of argument, and I shall rely heavily upon his account in what follows. I shall, however, attempt to capture the spirit of this general approach rather than to represent in full the views of any one of its advocates.

bined . . . could not by force take a drink from the Ohio or make a track on the Blue Ridge in a trial of a thousand years."<sup>20</sup> If this was youthful hyperbole, it nonetheless reflected a deeply rooted sense of geographical security. Seeing no reason from such a vantage point why it should become entangled in the petty quarrels of others, America elected to stand alone in majestic isolation—proud, strong, and convinced of her invulnerability.

If Lincoln epitomized the complacency in this outlook, it was Woodrow Wilson who brought its idealistic strain to its highest pitch. It was his conviction that it had fallen to America to play a unique moral role in the community of nations, that of conciliator and peacemaker. Such a role, he believed, could only be performed by a nation that stood apart from the travails of conflict. This conviction and the sense of moral superiority it reflected provided the stuff of America's resolve to stay out of war, a resolve that was soon swept away by the turbulent waters of World War I. But the foundation upon which it was based remained intact, and when America did go to war it did so for reasons every bit as elevated and in keeping with this conception of its high calling in the world as those that previously had dictated neutrality. It went to war—as we have been cynically reminded every since—to save democracy and to end all wars.

How did this moralism allegedly fail, and how was it supposedly responsible for the disastrous drift of U.S. policy between the wars?

The realist's answer is that it distorted our perspective on our proper role in the world and impeded recognition that national interest is at the heart of foreign policy. In Robert Osgood's words:

If Woodrow Wilson erred, it was not because he led the U.S. into war but because he failed to do everything in his power to prepare the people to see their entrance into a foreign war as an act consistent with imperative principles of national self-interest, as well as with national ideals and sentiments. In fact, by stressing America's disinterestedness as a condition of her mission of bringing peace to the world, Wilson actually directed all the force of his leadership toward concealing what should have been the most compelling reason for American intervention.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from "Abraham Lincoln on the Challenge of Violence," in *American Violence*, ed. Richard Maxwell Brown (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> *Ideals and Self-Interest*, p. 252. He also says that Americans were not wrong in their idealism but rather that they "failed from the first to guide and restrain their

The "compelling reason" for U.S. intervention was national self-interest and the recognition that our security, perhaps even survival, depends upon what takes place outside our own hemisphere. National interest sometimes requires going to war in the absence of direct threats to security. In the modern world, by the time a threat becomes overt one's security may already have been undermined. For that reason one must be prepared to take preventive action even where that means becoming involved in a foreign war. Wilson's mistake, on this view, was not to have led us into a foreign war. It was to have placed too much confidence in the power of "moral suasion" to deter evil in the world, too much confidence in the effectiveness of international organizations patterned after domestic legal models to preserve peace. It neglected the fundamental role of power in the world.<sup>22</sup> In short, we fought the right war under Wilson but for the wrong reasons.

According to realists, Wilsonianism also affected adversely the prosecution of the war and the postwar evolution of American policy.

George Kennan, for example, argues that the war threatened the European balance of power upon which both American and European security depended and for that reason needed to be ended quickly without thought of total victory.<sup>23</sup> But it was precisely, he

aspirations and sentiments with a realistic view of national conduct and a prudent recognition for the practical consequences of specific policies" (*ibid.*). This suggests that from a theoretical standpoint it was peripheral matters that were at fault and not idealism itself. This interpretation, however, conflicts with the main emphasis of his argument, which is that "as long as men owe their supreme loyalty to nation-states, nations ought to act upon idealistic ends only in so far as they are compatible with the most fundamental ends of national self-interest" (p. 21); and it is the latter that I shall stress. Notice, in any event, that the sentiments of the American people have pretty consistently been opposed to war. It is usually only after their leadership has involved them in war that they have—if then—come to support it wholeheartedly. Realists give insufficient attention to the fact that the attitude with which they would have us go to war—namely, a cool, dispassionate willingness to kill for limited objectives—is one that Americans have refused to adopt. Even the military have sometimes been reluctant to accept it. They find it incomprehensible that anyone should wage war without doing so to win. If one is concerned about the "realities" of international affairs, this suggests that the hope of gaining widespread acceptance of a political realist outlook may be unrealistic.

<sup>22</sup> America had long been interventionist within its own hemisphere. Realists tend to ignore the extent to which Wilson was "realistic" in much of his foreign policy, as in the invasion of Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson did, of course, disagree with this assessment. He said before the Senate on January 22, 1917: "If [the present war] be only a struggle for a new balance of power, who will guarantee, who can guarantee the stable equilibrium of the new arrangement? Only a tranquil Europe can be a stable Europe. There must be, not a balance of power, but a community of power; not organized rivalries, but an organized common peace" (*The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 1: 351). Here he put his finger upon what has been and is the key problem with balance of power

says, because considerations of power balance argued against total victory that people "rejected them so emphatically and sought more sweeping and grandiose objectives, for the accomplishment of which total victory could plausibly be represented as absolutely essential." When the cause is great and the enemy is perceived as the incarnation of evil, to settle for anything less than unconditional surrender is to compromise with the devil. Thus "a line of thought grew up, under Wilson's leadership, which provided both rationale and objective for our part in fighting the war to a bitter end."<sup>28</sup> Such righteous intransigence, it was thought, prolonged the war to the point where the European balance of power was destroyed and the seeds of World War II were sown.

The critique sketched here is at the heart of those realist analyses which allege that trying to act morally in international relations has bad consequences. It can be seen to be a blend of historical interpretation and normative judgments. Interestingly, it rejects morality on normative grounds.<sup>29</sup>

A crucial question, of course, is whether America's interest, much less her survival, was at stake in World War I. If it was not, then to have persuaded the American public that it was would have been deception. Beyond that, and beyond the question of the accuracy of the representation of Wilsonianism in this account, are the questions of whether Wilsonian idealism in fact had the consequences alleged—that is, whether it led to World War II—and whether, if it did, that shows the inadequacy of morality in international relations. I shall argue later that it does not.

Supposedly contributing further to the longer-range conse-

quences, namely, that they presuppose what almost never exists on the international scene, at least for any extended time: a stable system of relations among nations. This conclusion has been persuasively argued by Partha Chatterjee in "The Classical Balance of Power Theory," *Journal of Peace Research* 1 (1972): 51-61.

<sup>28</sup> *American Diplomacy*, p. 67. Kennan does, however, clear Wilson of responsibility for actually holding this view prior to early 1917 (*ibid.*, n. 6). Indeed, Wilson himself in that same Senate speech of 1917 (see n. 23) said prophetically that "[v]ictory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand" (*The Messages and Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, 1: 352).

<sup>29</sup> It may, even more paradoxically, be interpreted as rejecting the appeal to morality on moral grounds, an interpretation that would lift the theory out of the realm of political realism altogether. The central claim, that is, may be that morality would be better served if nations ceased trying to guide their conduct by it directly and instead steered their course by the more visible beacons of national self-interest. The assumption is that ultimately national self-interest and morality coincide, a view we shall have occasion to consider later.

quences was postwar disillusionment. Since the lofty ideals in whose name the war was fought were unrealized, the resultant disappointment—nourished as it was by revisionist historical analyses redistributing responsibility for the war—led to an even greater withdrawal of America from world affairs. "Since war could only be justified by exalted goals," Osgood says, "and since this war had failed to achieve exalted goals, it seemed to follow that all war was useless."<sup>30</sup> America's consequent reluctance to become involved in another war allegedly emboldened Nazism and Japanese militarism at a time when greater firmness might have forestalled World War II.

Thus whether American foreign policy during the crucial decades of the twentieth century quite verged on the commission of national suicide, as Osgood maintains,<sup>31</sup> and whether the policies of Christian isolationists were tantamount to "connivance" with tyranny, as Niebuhr contends,<sup>32</sup> these policies were in the view of realists at best seriously wrong-headed, and the moral perspective from which they were believed to have sprung was itself looked upon as a cause of war.

## IV

Supplementing and helping to explain accounts like the preceding is the more conspicuously theory-laden account of America's most eminent realist, Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>33</sup> His analysis keys in upon the very nature of collectivities and the theological and metaphysical foundations of the historical processes at work in their formation.

Niebuhr contends that group relations inevitably express a collective egoism and hence "can never be as ethical as those which characterize individual relations."<sup>34</sup> Their very nature renders

<sup>30</sup> *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 99.

<sup>31</sup> *Ideals and Self-Interest*, p. 430.

<sup>32</sup> "To Prevent the Triumph of an Intolerable Tyranny," in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1967), p. 278.

<sup>33</sup> Acknowledging Niebuhr's influence upon American realists, George Kennan has called him "the father of us all." Quoted in Kenneth W. Thompson, *Political Realism and the Crisis of World Politics* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), p. 23. Niebuhr's analysis does not conform in all of its particulars to the preceding account of political realism. Nor do other realists subscribe to all of Niebuhr's account. But the Niebuhrian analysis sustains the essentials of the analyses of many other realists and yields a similar conclusion about the role of morality in international relations.

<sup>34</sup> *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), p. 63.

them incapable of responding to moral considerations or of responding in more than a limited way.<sup>31</sup> This gives social and international relations their distinctive character, a fact that must be reckoned with by statesmen as well as by social reformers who encounter the same phenomenon in their dealings with society and intrasocietal groups. Because this phenomenon is built into the very nature of collectivities, it makes Niebuhr's position basically a form of necessitarianism.

The view that nations act without regard for moral considerations conflicts with analyses of realists like Kennan and Osgood, who maintain that the United States was motivated by moral considerations during the period under examination. It is one thing to say that nations do not or cannot act out of regard for moral considerations. It is another to say that they can and do but that doing so has had consequences. Realists do not always distinguish these claims. Some base their case primarily upon the normative judgment, which conflicts with the explanatory hypothesis presently under consideration; others base it upon metaphysical considerations like Niebuhr's.

Assume for the present that nations do act without regard for moral principles and that individual persons often willingly subordinate their own personal interests to the service of the state. What accounts for this? Niebuhr gives two explanations.

The first lies in the theological-metaphysical orientation of neoorthodox Christianity, specifically in the "stubbornness of sin" in all men. This is an allegedly unalterable fact of the human condition whose ramifications are magnified at the international level. Failure to perceive this, Niebuhr says, is the chief error of those

One suspects that Niebuhr regards morality in international affairs in much the same light as he does Christian love, as an "impossible ideal" to be striven for but realistically understood to be unattainable. See his *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), *passim*.

<sup>31</sup> Although it sometimes sounds as though Niebuhr believes that nations cannot transcend self-interest at all, he more often speaks as though their ability to do so is simply more restricted than that of individual persons. It should be noted, however, that this claim conflicts with much of the analysis realists give of World War I (and in some cases, World War II and Vietnam as well). It is often contended that the United States was acting on moral grounds in those cases, but naively so and to its own detriment. One cannot have it both ways. If nations cannot rise above self-interest and respond to moral considerations, then whatever the proper analysis of America's foreign policy through the first half of the twentieth century, the problem with that policy cannot be that it was guided by morality. It cannot even be, as Niebuhr maintains, that the country was acting hypocritically—which implies that it could have acted morally but sought instead merely to give the appearance of doing so.

"modern moralists"<sup>32</sup> who assume that "with a little more time, a little more adequate moral and social pedagogy and a generally higher development of human intelligence, our social problems will approach solution"<sup>33</sup>—a view, he contends, that goes back to our culture's "romantic overestimate of human virtue and moral capacity."

In this way the problem is tied first to self-interest, then to sin, and finally to the whole traditional Christian outlook upon the world. Augustine convinced Christians that they could serve the state; Luther convinced them that what the state did was not the Christian's business; and Niebuhr would convince them that the evil states do when disconnected from the pacifistic orientation of Christianity must be accepted as part of the tragic nature of things.

When men have lost the fear of God, new life is injected into religion by shifting its focus from individuals to collectivities. The international scene then becomes, in Niebuhr's words, "a perfect picture of human finitude and a tragic revelation of the consequences of sinful dishonesty which accompany every effort to transcend it."<sup>34</sup> He says further:

Moralists may find this trait of human nature, its grudging concessions, its unwillingness to repent except under chastisement, abhorrent, and they may dream of another kind of history than the actual history of man. But if they examined their own conduct scrupulously, they would find evidences in it of this same reluctance and would learn to appreciate the tragic elements in history as manifestations of divine judgment, without which men would remain in the stupor of sin.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Like John Dewey, whom he is fond of chiding, Dewey did, however, recognize a darker side to human nature, saying that "[t]he old Adam, the unregenerate element in human nature, persists. It shows itself wherever the method obtains of attaining results by use of force instead of by the method of communication and enlightenment. See *The Public and Its Problems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1927), p. 154. And Dewey, too, deplored naïve optimism in social and international affairs. But he traced it to what he called our "traditional evangelical trust" in morals divorced from intelligence. See Joseph Ratner, ed., *Intelligence in the Modern World: John Dewey's Philosophy* (New York: The Modern Library, 1939), p. 497. For another challenge to optimism in social matters, see Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Possession* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1972).

<sup>33</sup> "Introduction" to *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. xiii. See also *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), pp. 94-95, 99.

<sup>34</sup> *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> "Chastisement unto Repentance or Death," in Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, p. 181.



George Kennan charged antiwar activists of the 1960s with much the same failure. He said they failed to perceive "a vitally important truth . . . namely, that the decisive seat of evil in this world is not in social and political institutions, and not even, as a rule, in the will or iniquities of statesmen, but simply in the weakness and imperfection of the human soul itself," by which he added that he meant literally every soul.<sup>36</sup> The upshot is a profound pessimism not only about human goodness but about the power of human resources, even when governed by the best of intentions, to redress the world's evils.<sup>37</sup>

The other explanation of "collective egoism" found in Niebuhr conflicts with the line of reasoning we have just been considering.

It holds that the evil of collectivities is incompatible with the supposition that individual men are good. "No school asks," he says in *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, "how it is that an essentially good man could have produced corrupting and tyrannical political organizations or exploiting economic organizations, or fanatical and superstitious religious organizations,"<sup>38</sup> the intended point being, of course, that there is no answer to this question. But he himself had already answered it in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in which he wrote:

There is an ethical paradox in patriotism which defies every but the most astute and sophisticated analysis. The paradox is that patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism. Loyalty to the nation is a high form of altruism when compared with lesser loyalties and more parochial interests. It therefore becomes the vehicle of all the altruistic impulses and expresses itself, on occasion, with such fervor that the critical attitudes of the individual toward the nation and its enterprises is almost completely destroyed. The unqualified character of this devotion is the very basis of the nation's

<sup>36</sup> *Democracy and the Student Left* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), pp. 8-9.

<sup>37</sup> There are also, it should be noted, secular versions of this approach. They seek to explain war and violence by appeal to innate aggression, will to power, or a territorial instinct. See, for example, Konrad Lorenz, *Human Aggression* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1963); Hans Morganthau, *Politics among Nations* (New York: Knopf, 1966), chap. 8; and Robert Ardrey, *African Genesis: A Personal Investigation into the Animal Origins and Nature of Man* (New York: Delta Publishing Company, 1961), esp. chap. 6. Some of these have a more respectable ring than do sin and corruption to those who aspire to a political or naturalistic science of such matters. But the assessment of human affairs to which they lead is only slightly less gloomy than the one associated with the theological version.

<sup>38</sup> (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 17.

power and of the freedom to use the power without moral restraint. Thus the unselfishness of individuals makes for the selfishness of nations.<sup>39</sup>

Here it is the basically good, unselfish, self-sacrificing qualities of individual persons that are held to be the source of the immorality of groups,<sup>40</sup> not egoism or sinfulness. But if man has the traits presupposed in this account, one can no longer credibly maintain a doctrine of the inherent corruption of each and every soul, as presupposed by the preceding account. And though Niebuhr does not regard this as a serious problem, it brings the two accounts into conflict with one another. The very ground of the first account's pessimism is removed by one of the conditions of the paradox in the second account.

Much of what Niebuhr says in this second account rings true psychologically, and there is supporting testimony for it from other sources, including Tolstoy, Dewey, Durkheim, Lorenz, and Koestler.<sup>41</sup> Once such an identification with the larger collectivity is established and people become bonded to it through patriotism, they will sacrifice themselves by the thousands for that collectivity; and they will do so, if unwittingly, in the service of evil as readily as in the service of good. Indeed, this account is in keeping with the insight that the source of the world's greatest evils lies less in the works of evil men than in the works of basically good people whose efforts go awry through ignorance, misunderstanding, misplaced loyalties, and too much rather than too little willingness to sacrifice themselves for others, particularly at the behest of those who govern them.

<sup>39</sup> Page 91. See also *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, p. 167.

<sup>40</sup> Carried to one of its possible conclusions, this line of reasoning argues for the perpetuation of war precisely in order to foster these traits. See, for example, Benito Mussolini, "The Doctrine of Fascism," in *Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. J. Somerville and R. E. Santoni (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1963), pp. 424-441. Niebuhr is at times intrigued by other beneficial effects of war. Concerning World War II, for example, see his "Chastisement unto Repentance or Death," in Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, pp. 180-183.

<sup>41</sup> F. H. Green captured the same thought when he wrote that "the members of the nation in their corporate or associated action are animated by certain passions, arising out of their association, which, though not egoistic relatively to the individual subjects of them (for they are motives to self-sacrifice), may, in their influence on the dealings of one nation with another, have an effect analogous to that which egoistic passions, properly so called, have upon the dealings of individuals with each." *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), p. 175.

What I shall call neorealism emerged as the full import of nuclear weapons was being realized in the mid-1950s. It was then that it was fully recognized that nuclear weapons are not just bigger bombs but rather mark a quantum leap in the evolution of warfare and for that reason call for a rethinking of military strategy.

Although neorealism does not break radically with the earlier realism, it takes a more tough-minded view of international relations. Morality recedes further into the background, the theological metaphysics is sloughed off, and talk of peace diminishes. As a greater frequency of violence is traded off for a supposedly reduced risk of nuclear war, the emphasis shifts from the attainment of peace to the limitation of violence. War comes to be seen as more or less inevitable, if not sometimes desirable. Power continues to be considered the dominant feature of international relations and national self-interest the controlling motive.

When the United States and the Soviet Union became fully fledged nuclear powers, they were likened to a scorpion and a tarantula in a bottle; it was thought that if ever they clashed they would destroy one another. But this was believed to create a special problem for the United States. On the assumption that we would not use nuclear weapons first,<sup>62</sup> and would in any event never use them for blackmail, we seemed to be vulnerable to the ruthless cunning of the Soviets. By manipulating events so as never to confront us with an issue so momentous as to warrant nuclear war, the Soviets could, it was thought, erode our security by repeatedly forcing us to make concessions or risk a needless conflagration. Our horror of nuclear war, as Kissinger argued in *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, would paralyze our will. Whereas the fear had previously been that we would be annihilated in a nuclear war, it was now that we would die a death by a thousand concessions. The image of mushroom clouds gave way to that of falling dominoes.

The Berlin crises gave some credence to this theory. They were seen as posing precisely the dilemma of how to counter Soviet actions with regard to the Berlin corridor without risking nuclear war. What was needed, it was felt, was a middle course between doing nothing and igniting a holocaust. "The West," realist Ray-

<sup>62</sup> An assumption repudiated frequently by the U.S. government.

mond Aron lamented, "has failed to find a substitute for total war other than peace itself."<sup>63</sup>

The solution was to develop a limited war capability that would give us the flexibility to take the initiative rather than always responding to the Communists and, when responding, would enable us to do so with limited risk of nuclear war. The idea was not to do away with nuclear weapons, or even to stop multiplying them. It was to supplement them so as to be able to deal more effectively with situations for which they were militarily or politically ill-suited. In net effect this opened the door to a policy of interventionism in the hope, as expressed by Herman Kahn, that "the need for intervention may well be decreased if we have the capacity and resolve to do it."<sup>64</sup>

In this way a more dynamic policy was purchased at the cost of a greater willingness to go to war. But it was a willingness that disavowed the crusading, moralistic spirit of the so-called "idealists" and instead pursued limited, "rational" objectives. "To save humanity from thermonuclear war," Aron said again of the world's leaders, "they have saved war."<sup>65</sup>

This strategy bore fruit under the Kennedy administration. But the fruit it bore was the bitter one of Vietnam. Just as Vietnam was the testing ground for new weapons, it came eventually to be the testing ground of a new theory, the limited war doctrine. It also became the testing ground of some of the prescriptions of political realists.

Not that all thinking on international relations during this period fit this pattern. John Foster Dulles, that redoubtable architect of U.S. foreign policy during the middle years of the 1950s, was undeniably moralistic and often dogmatic. Whether this moralism was part of a broader point of view that in fact (and not merely in rhetoric) brought moral considerations to bear upon foreign policy, or was in actuality nothing more than a tougher-than-usual application of the same standards that world leaders normally apply, is unclear. What is clear is that Dulles was strongly motivated by his conception of what constituted the national interest, and even if there stood behind this the conviction that promoting America's national interest was the moral (and Christian and perhaps Presbyterian) thing to do, the practical import was not easily distinguishable from political realism.

<sup>63</sup> *On War* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1968), p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> *On Thermonuclear War* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 571.

<sup>65</sup> *On War*, p. viii.

In any event, neorealist thinking took shape as the preceding line of thinking fused with anticommunism. The result was a strongly ideological outlook, a view, as one analyst has put it, "championed by military men who felt that the United States had entered a revolutionary new age which rendered traditional diplomatic methods obsolete. . . . Massive mobilization of resources, weapons technology, and a 'battle for men's minds' were keys to the future of world politics."<sup>46</sup> Such realism was as dogmatic, inflexible, and uncompromising as ever the realists thought idealists to be; as much so, in fact, that there came to be a kind of yearning for a return to the good old balance of power approach, which has a greater aura of objectivity and coolheadedness about it.

Insofar as the balance of power approach embodies the implicit normative judgment that the governing principle in the conduct of foreign policy should be to try to maintain a balance of power—and insofar as it takes this to be the basic principle of foreign policy—it entails political realism. The balance of power theory per se has nothing to do with moral considerations. Unqualified adherence to it in fact proscribes such considerations. It calls up images of giant springs, pulleys, and balance wheels, with the only problem being to keep things in equilibrium. This is basically an engineering problem: just as in Keynesian economics, with its dominant metaphor of "fine tuning," the basic problem becomes a mechanical one. In each case, cold, objective calculation is the key, and morality is left aside.

One could reconcile balance of power with morality, of course, if one maintained that maintenance of a balance of power has the best consequences for the international world in general and that the production of such consequences is the dominant concern of morality. In that case the judgment that we should maintain a balance of power would not be a basic principle. It would merely be a secondary principle, requiring constant moral appraisal in light of its consequences. But this is not how its advocates regard it. They consider it as detached from ethics and as having an abstract, scientific quality about it. As Churchill put it, the balance of power "has nothing to do with rulers or nations" but is "a law of public policy . . . and not a mere expedient dictated by accidental circumstances, or likes and dislikes, or any other sentiment."<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup> John Franklin Campbell, "What is to be Done?" *Foreign Affairs* 49, no. 1 (Oct. 1970): 84.

<sup>47</sup> Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), pp. 237-238.

The defects of the balance of power theory have sometimes been pointed up by realists themselves. Niebuhr argued that an "unorganized balance of power" is potential anarchy and cannot preserve peace. "The introduction of a single new factor in the precarious equilibrium," he said, "or the elaboration of a single new force of recalcitrance . . . may destroy the balance."<sup>48</sup> And Schlesinger, in discussing relations among the victors at the end of World War II and the rejection by the United States of a spheres of influence arrangement, observes that the balance of power "had always broken down in the past. It held out to each power the permanent temptation to try to alter the balance in its own favor, and it built this temptation into the international order."<sup>49</sup>

These views merely question the possibility of maintaining a power balance, however, and leave unchallenged—and indeed presuppose—its applicability to international relations. But balance of power theory requires not only that power can be balanced but also that all sides can know when it is balanced. It presupposes furthermore that knowing this will make a difference to their conduct. And all three points are questionable.

Assuming that we can make sense of the notion of a balance of power, the complexity of international affairs is such that it would be virtually impossible to know for certain when it had been achieved. For it would depend in large part on factors like morale, which are not quantifiable. Morale, in fact, as Tolstoy maintained, is a major factor in battles and in warfare generally. Though it is obviously less so in push-button warfare, it was a major factor—perhaps the decisive one—in Vietnam, in which the morale of the militarily weaker Vietcong and North Vietnamese far outstripped that of the Americans. This helps to explain why American political and military estimates of the power balance—which were invariably and overwhelmingly in American favor when calculated in quantitative terms—were consistently mistaken. It also helps to explain why the almost pathologically optimistic predictions from U.S. officials over the years were so far out of touch with reality.

Even if one could be confident that there was a balance of power at any given time, and that all sides could know when it obtains (and this is essential, since a balance of power is of little consequence unless the right people know there is one), it is doubtful that it could guarantee peace. To assume that it could is to impute

<sup>48</sup> "Plans for World Reorganization," in Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, p. 218.

<sup>49</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs* 46 (Oct. 1967): 22-51.

to world leaders a degree of rationality for which history gives little warrant. The temptation of which Schlesinger writes so often grows out of a gambling instinct, a hope that enough daring or bluff will give one the advantage in an otherwise even situation.

That nations do not in any event consistently think of international relations in terms of the balance of power, or at any rate do not consistently believe in acting in terms of that model, is clear. No nation would bolster the armaments of a potential enemy simply to equalize power. What nations desire first and foremost is superiority. They favor a balance of power only when they lag behind or are barely keeping pace.

Niebuhr sympathized more with the imperialists who, he said . . . actually have a more hopeful program than the "balance of power" realists. They know that a balance of power must be organized and that a dominant power must be the organizing center. They expect either America, or the Anglo-Saxon hegemony, or the four great powers, Russia, China, Britain, and America, to form the organizing center of the world community.<sup>56</sup>

To this he added, "I think they are right in this thesis and that there is no possibility of organizing the world at all that will not be exposed to the charge of imperialism by the idealists who do not take the problem of power seriously."

This view marks an evolution from earlier forms of realism in recognizing that even self-interest is inadequate to motivate America to realize itself fully in international affairs. Its advocates are refreshingly forthright in presenting their case. As George Liska, one of their more articulate spokesmen, puts it, we must "avoid the necessity for overstating an issue of international order as one of national security. The intellectual indolence and political opportunism underlying the habit of formulating all demanding policy in terms of vital interests affecting national security are self-defeating for any state with more than sporadic external involvement."<sup>57</sup> This conflicts with much of Niebuhr, as well as with the realist position argued by Kennan and Osgood, which keeps national interest at the heart of international relations.

While Liska disavows national interest as the proper goal for

<sup>56</sup> "Plans for World Reorganization," in Robertson, ed., *Love and Justice*, p. 210.

<sup>57</sup> George Liska, *War and Order: Reflections on Vietnam and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), pp. 56-57.

America, it is still a kind of national self-interest, broadly conceived, that operates in his own theory.

National interest so broadly conceived as to coincide with the maintenance of order may be called "imperial interest." . . . Imperial interest is neither the sum of specific national interests nor of group interests. . . . The practical scope of the imperial interest will be in most situations determined by national capability or power rather than by imperatives of immediate national security.<sup>58</sup>

The aim of this conception is world order, but an imperial order that "rests on the fear or respect of lesser powers, secured and held by the judicious alternation of forcefulness, self-restraint, and munificence of the imperial state."<sup>59</sup>

This is the organizing element of which Niebuhr spoke in his characterization of imperial realism. Here there is no longer any condition that a nation can achieve in terms of domestic harmony and prosperity or national security which suffices to establish that its interest has been realized. Its "imperial" interest is expressed in self-assertiveness, and self-assertiveness internationally is restrained only by the limits of a nation's power. A nation aspires to power so as to be able to maintain world order for its advantage. The achievement of national security thus is not an end in itself but only a necessary condition of advancing to more ambitious uses of power. Imperial interest, so conceived, is then an extension of the more usual realist conception of national interest.

Why should America or any other nation commit itself to the quest for imperial power? Certainly not for moral reasons. Nor, basically, for those of national security. Though national security supposedly follows from this policy, it is not its goal. The answer for Liska lies in forces operating within the "system" of international affairs:

To the extent that the United States is being propelled presently toward an imperial role in the global system, it does so in response to the system's needs rather than its internal strains. . . . Like individuals, so nations worthy of the name will not withdraw into repose in the external dealings and thus, almost inevitably, submit to the momentum of decline,

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 56.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

until they have explored in action the outermost limits of possible achievement.<sup>54</sup>

Similar, if less obvious, statements are found in various contemporary writers, as when Kissinger says that "there are no plateaus in international affairs; what is not a stepping stone soon becomes the beginning of a decline."<sup>55</sup> One senses here the ghost of German philosophy and its conception of the state, which either engages in relentless self-assertion or slips into decline. Only here the metaphysics has been stripped away and replaced with metaphors.

The transition from national self-interest, conceived primarily in terms of self-preservation, to this broader conception of imperial interest, marks a departure from earlier realism. According to Liska, "the containment of the more assertive of the communist great powers is still necessary; but it may well be secondary to the containment of disorder caused ultimately by some form of insufficient power."<sup>56</sup> And as "all order, just or unjust, rests in the last resort, if in different degrees, on force,"<sup>57</sup> the pursuit of imperial interest commits America to the use of international violence.

Though there are occasional references to justice in this scheme, if there should be any doubt about the place of morality in it—even to the extent recognized by traditional realists like Osgood, who maintains that there are certain ideals that should not be forsaken no matter what—it is dispelled by Liska's assertion with respect to Vietnam that

[t]he destruction in South and North Vietnam becomes more bearable [sic] when one regards the war not as a defense of South Vietnam or of the United States, but as an increasingly symbolic contest, with both global and long-range significance for the cause of order and therefore the degree and kind of peace in the world at large. Suffer as they do and must, the peoples of Vietnam are not the first or the last small people to render such a service to the larger commonweal.<sup>58</sup>

Just as traditional realists trace the disastrous consequences of World War I to the alleged fact that America went to war for the

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Henry A. Kissinger, *The Troubled Partnership* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 246.

<sup>56</sup> *War and Order*, p. 27.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

wrong reasons and failed to see the paramountcy of self-interest in its affairs, so the imperialists among the neorealists see a similar failure in the emphasis upon self-interest and would have us move on to the plane of imperial interest.

## VI

What has in fact been the motivation of American leaders in the post-World War II period? Has it been essentially realistic in the preceding sense?

The haze of secrecy surrounding so much of high-level decision making makes it almost impossible to answer such a question with confidence. But the drift of U.S. foreign policy in the post-World War II period has been decidedly in the direction urged by political realists. In the case of Vietnam it has been tailor-made to their specifications. In saying this I am going against the views of realists like Schlesinger, who maintain that, for the most part, the problems of the postwar period derive precisely from the fact that U.S. policy has not been realistic.

Schlesinger points out that every American war has been followed in due course by skeptical reassessment of supposedly sacred assumptions.<sup>59</sup> This is understandable, he believes, because war signifies for most people a failure to govern their affairs in a reasonable and humane way. Vietnam was an exception, in that the critical reassessment occurred while the war was still in progress—to a greater extent than occurred during the Korean War, another unpopular war. But Schlesinger is unhappy with much of this reassessment, at least as reflected in the statements and writings of antiwar radicals. He accordingly sets about to detail the mistaken assumptions behind the Vietnam policy.

He sees these mistaken assumptions as growing out of American policy in the postwar era. But their origins extend further back. He argues that World War II concluded under the gathering clouds of the Cold War and that central among the emergent issues was that between "conflicting world orders"—universalism and spheres of influence:

the "universalist" view, by which all nations shared a common interest in all the affairs of the world, and the "sphere-of-influence" view, by which each great power would be assured

<sup>59</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of Confidence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 77.

by the other great powers of an acknowledged predominance of its own area of special interest. The universalist view assumed that national security would be guaranteed by an international organization. The sphere-of-influence view assumed that national security would be guaranteed by the balance of power.<sup>60</sup>

The roots of the Cold War, according to Schlesinger, lay in this conflict. The Soviets were preoccupied with their own security, which they conceived in terms of the maintenance of a sphere of influence. The Americans under FDR were determined (if waveringly) to place stock in international organizations like the United Nations, much as Wilson had done with the League of Nations. Despite occasional leanings, FDR was in principle a Wilsonian, Schlesinger says, one who was checked by the Wilsonian Cordell Hull when he showed a tendency to backslide. He and Hull had widespread support among other members of government for this basic outlook, and opposition to the sphere-of-influence approach "seems clearly to have been the predominant mood of the American people."<sup>61</sup> Thus it was, according to Schlesinger's view, that universalism, "rooted in the American legal and moral tradition, overwhelmingly backed by public opinion, received successive enshrinements in the Atlantic Charter of 1941, in the Declaration of the United Nations in 1942 and in the Moscow Declaration of 1943."<sup>62</sup>

This interpretation is not unchallenged, however, even among realists. Whereas Schlesinger sees this period as a continuation of the tradition identified with Wilson, Osgood heralded it as a turn toward greater realism and viewed it optimistically. For this reason it will be helpful if we can thread our way through the proliferation of "isms" that these analyses generate and try to understand better the nature of this apparent divergence among realists.

To do this requires sorting out the different strands of Wilsonianism—a notion that, like idealism, has become a convenient source of explanation for whatever is wrong with American foreign policy. These strands include the alleged idealism, the moralism, and the universalism. The idealism—the view that foreign policy should be governed by moral considerations—was indeed at the heart of Wilsonianism. It is this that realists reject. The mor-

alism, I will suggest in the next chapter, was not an essential ingredient in Wilsonianism, although it became a conspicuous feature of it after America's entry into World War I. The universalism, in the sense Schlesinger intends, of a shared interest on the part of all of the nations of the world with world events, was an essential part of it but was not entailed by the idealism.

In seeing America's course in World War II as one of realism, Osgood has in mind in large part the rejection of idealism. Certainly this interpretation is supported by statements of FDR to the effect that the United States was in the war not to save democracy but to protect its own interests. And it is supported by his expansion of the notion of self-interest in such a way as to extend our defense perimeter virtually around the world. This has been a recurrent theme in American realism. What realists object to was the attempt, once self-interest and national security are redefined in this way, to place stock in their maintenance by international organizations and legalistic structures patterned after domestic ones. But this means that at least a part of what Osgood calls realism and applauds in FDR Schlesinger calls Wilsonianism and deplors.

This becomes clearer if we note an ambiguity in Schlesinger's characterization of universalism. The first sense, just mentioned, is that in which "all nations shared a common interest in all the affairs of the world," a view which "assumed that national security would be guaranteed by an international organization." This conception is indeed Wilsonian. But Schlesinger also speaks of universalism in a second sense when he says: "By 'universalism' I mean the belief that the United States has an active and vital interest in the destiny of every nation on the planet."<sup>63</sup> While this second sense is probably an overstatement of anything ever seriously held by American foreign policy experts, it is only a slight one and is in keeping with the philosophy of many realists. This is the sense to which Schlesinger shifts when launching his attack upon postwar U.S. policy. Obscured in the process is the fact that what he now calls universalism and identifies with Wilsonianism is precisely what some realists find lacking in Wilsonianism and make the cornerstone of political realism.

Having shifted from one sense of "universalism," the genuinely Wilsonian one, to the other sense, which accords with political realism, Schlesinger proceeds to analyze the policies that eventuated in Vietnam. Here, he argues, universalism led to tragedy.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

It did so not because the underlying principles were wrong but because they were overextended. There was a convergence of influences here: from the 1930s the notion of "collective security" under Henry Stimson, from the 1940s the "social evangelism" of FDR, from the 1950s the anticommunism of John Foster Dulles. Mix these together and you get Wilsonianism in Vietnam as well.

The tragedy of Vietnam is the tragedy of the catastrophic overextension and misapplication of valid principles. The original insights of collective security and liberal evangelism were generous and wise. But compulsive Stimsonianism and compulsive New Dealism, stimulated by the illusions of Superpower, rigidified by an absolutist anticommunism and pressed ever forward by the professional demands of the new warrior class, brought American universalism in time into a messianic phase.<sup>64</sup>

This episode came to a close, he maintains, on March 31, 1968, with Lyndon Johnson's decision not to seek reelection. "What was announced was the collapse of the messianic conception of the American role in the world—indeed, the end of the entire Age of the Superpowers."<sup>65</sup>

This is a replay of the standard realist critique of Wilson following World War I. The same ingredients are there: the implication of self-righteousness, of a lack of realism, of a crusading mentality, of failure to see where the country's interests lay, and of messianism. It is almost as though any period in American foreign affairs that has less than desirable consequences is to be assessed by the same formula. Since any such period will be one in which there will have been mistakes in judgment, policymakers will always be subject to the charge of having failed to be "realistic." Even Schlesinger himself seems to reconsider this analysis when he takes to task both Kissinger and Daniel Moynihan for attributing the defeat in Vietnam chiefly to domestic failures, such as Congress's cutting of aid to General Thieu. Of this, Schlesinger says:

The reason Americans lost faith in the Indochina war was not at all because their nerve failed but precisely because they came to feel that the geopolitical theory of the war [advocated by Kissinger] made no sense. They simply did not believe it when their leaders told them that the communization of In-

dochina would be a deadly threat to the security of the United States. . . . The "misery of it all" in Vietnam was not a failure of nerve on the part of the people, but a failure of intelligence on the part of their leaders. They deceived us, and themselves, when they told us that the future of Indochina would make a serious difference to the future of the United States.<sup>66</sup>

This, of course, does not do full justice to the many dimensions of opposition to the Vietnam War. Many people opposed the war not merely because they did not believe that Vietnam was essential to U.S. security but because they were convinced that what the United States was doing there was wrong. They would have objected to it on those grounds even if a convincing case had been made that keeping South Vietnam under U.S. domination was in our national interest. But that notwithstanding, the depiction of the position of the U.S. leaders in Schlesinger's analysis is precisely in line with political realism: the contention is that the principal justification for the war was national interest. National egoism was the governing norm. That these leaders were wrong in seeing national interest at stake in Vietnam, and were wrong in so many other judgments, in no way affects the fact that if Schlesinger's characterization is correct, the most plausible interpretation of their underlying philosophy is that of political realism. If so, Vietnam was not an overextension of valid principles. It was the fruit of the limited-war strategy born in the late 1950s, conjoined with political realism.

In any event, let us look back a little further to the characterization by a realist of the course on which the United States embarked after World War II and the optimistic prognosis for the future that it contained:

The astounding growth of America's willingness to take an active part in world politics, the amazing speed with which Americans have junked old concepts of neutrality and readily entangled their affairs in political and military arrangements with other nations, deliberately adopting extensive worldwide commitments unthinkable a short while ago; these developments reflect a widespread recognition of the exigencies of survival. They may also signify the emergence of a more stable and effective foreign policy.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>66</sup> "Failure of Nerve—or Intellect?" *The Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 1978.

<sup>67</sup> *Osgood, Ideals and Self-Interest*, p. 432.

This is Osgood writing in 1953. These events, he maintains, represent a maturing of the American people in which they "gradually adapted their conduct of foreign relations to the realities of international society." He stresses that in order to achieve the aims of this more effective policy, liberal idealists and international reformers will

be forced to put the exigencies of power politics ahead of their moral sensibilities. Similarly, if they want to pursue their ideals effectively, they must base American aid to foreign peoples primarily upon the power advantage to the United States and only secondarily upon humanitarian considerations. They must, at times, support reactionary and anti-democratic regimes with arms and money. They must even put themselves in the position of resisting with force the misguided proponents of a social revolution, which arises, in large part, from basic human aspirations which the American mission itself claims to fulfill.<sup>66</sup>

These are the prescriptions of a political realist. And it is hard to see that they were not admirably implemented. The United States supported reactionary governments in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America; based aid upon considerations of power advantage to itself in Greece and South Africa; and fought against "misguided" revolutionaries in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic. It subverted a democratically elected regime in Chile, overthrew the government of Grenada, and sponsored rebels against the government of Nicaragua. And in both Korea and Vietnam it fought the limited wars that realists would have our wars be, in which unconditional surrender was never an objective and in which, despite excesses in Vietnam, restraints in design and execution were continually in effect. Vietnam, at any rate, was a war directed by dispassionate efficiency experts making calculated use of the best of

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438. Notice that Osgood speaks here of what America must do in order to pursue its ideals effectively, as though ideals were to supersede self-interest. This indicates an ambivalence in his thought (characteristic of many realists) between the desire to affirm the paramountcy of national interest and a reluctance to part altogether with morality. The result is sometimes one of trying to have it both ways. More often it results in subordinating morality to national interest. Thus while Osgood contends that "the calculation of national advantage without regard for the interrelation of ideals and self-interest is not only immoral as a national end but unrealistic as a means to an end" (p. 442), he also says that "[i]f the United States is to have a stable and effective foreign policy, neither egoism nor altruism must interfere with the rational, objective assessment of the real long-run conditions of American self-interest" (p. 443).

modern technology and military science—precisely the opposite of the moralistic crusade that some realists would represent it as being once it failed.<sup>69</sup> And it was a war rationalized by an entangling alliance (SEATO),<sup>70</sup> waged about as far from our borders as one can get, and justified by appeal to national self-interest. Had that intervention succeeded in 1965 or 1968 one suspects that instead of calling it a moralistic crusade, political realists would today be applauding it as bold, forthright, and hardheadedly pragmatic—and chalking it up to a policy of realism.

This does not mean that political realists themselves are insensitive jingoists. They are forward-looking, intelligent men whose analyses are as thoughtful as they would have our statesmen be. And if Schlesinger overstates things when he says that it was realists who were most skeptical about Vietnam from the beginning, it is certainly true that some of them, like Osgood, thought Vietnam intervention ill-advised as far back as 1957,<sup>71</sup> others, like Morgenthau, were long-standing critics of the war, and still others, like Schlesinger himself, came to be disenchanted with it.<sup>72</sup> But the

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Schlesinger's statement: "Since it is painful to charge our national leaders with stupidity, one must suppose that this foolish analysis of the relation of Indo-China to the American national interest was only a secondary motive for our involvement in Indo-China. The primary motive, it seems probable in retrospect, had little to do with national interest at all. It was rather a precise consequence of the belief that moral principles should govern decisions of foreign policy. It was the insistence on seeing the civil war in Vietnam as above all a moral issue that led us to construe political questions in ethical terms, local questions in global terms, and relative questions in absolute terms" ("National Interests and Moral Absolutes," in *Leffler, ed., Ethics and World Politics*, p. 37). See also Schlesinger's *The Crisis of Confidence*. This way of viewing matters has come to constitute almost a formula for instant and superficial analyses of American foreign policy over the years. Major failures are automatically explained as owing to "not enough realism," to the holding sway of visionary idealism, to the unrealistic attempt to implement moral judgments in foreign policy. And thus the cry is raised anew, as after World War I and World War II and again after Vietnam, for a return to a hardheaded understanding of the realities of international affairs—in short, for a return to realism.

<sup>70</sup> At least much of the time. Almost every remotely marketable "justification" was given a try at one time or another.

<sup>71</sup> See *Limited War*, pp. 234-226.

<sup>72</sup> See *The Crisis of Confidence*, chap. 4. Kennan wrote in 1954 of our involvement in Indochina that "[o]ur government is obviously making a concentrated and determined effort to come to grips with the problem. We can only wish them well and give them our confidence and support." See *Realities of American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 95-96. In 1967, acknowledging that "the Vietnam involvement . . . marches under the same semantic banner"—namely, that of "containment"—that had become closely associated with him in the early 1950s (though see his comments on the allegation that he authored a "containment policy" in his *Memoirs: 1925-1950*, vol. 1 [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967], chap. 13), he said that it should be apparent to anyone who re-



fact remains that to assign paramountcy to national interest commits one to the rationalization of any magnitude of evil that circumstances might render necessary to protect that interest. What this philosophy cannot allow, or allow to be decisive, is that a war like Vietnam could be successful beyond the wildest dreams of its executors and yet be totally and unqualifiedly wrong from a moral standpoint.

That Vietnam was an American tragedy militarily, politically, and morally some will dispute. That it was never in the national interest to intervene there some will dispute. But that it was a product of the kind of foreign policy advocated by political realists is indisputable.

fects upon the "official rationale and methodology" of Vietnam policy that it does not accord with the concept that he advocates (from an abbreviated version of an address delivered at Harvard in Spring 1967 under the auspices of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History, published as "The Quest for Concept," *Harvard Today*, Autumn 1967). Nonetheless, in keeping with his realist predisposition against judging morally, about the most he can bring himself to say about the "totality of our action in Vietnam" is that it "might well classify as a massive imprudence but scarcely as a deliberate crime" (*Democracy and the Student Left*, p. 139). In any event, as Rothstein observes, it is often "difficult to relate an individual Realist's position on policy to his philosophical convictions" ("On the Costs of Political Realism," p. 352).

## T H R E E

REASON OF STATE, MILITARY  
NECESSITY, AND DOMESTIC SECURITY

Viewed from within, each religious or national fanaticism stands for a good; but in its outward operation it produces and becomes an evil. —George Santayana

Political realism in twentieth-century American thought, as we have seen, is primarily normative. It argues that mortality *should* be excluded from international relations, or at best given a limited role. This sets it apart from the positivistic realism of those who deny the very intelligibility of applying moral notions to the conduct of states.

I shall comment later upon the theological-metaphysical view of human nature underlying much of this approach. Before that, however, I want to examine the Niebuhrian view that groups are incapable of achieving the same standard of morality as individuals and that therefore a collective morality must be recognized over and above the individual morality of persons.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Niebuhr, we have seen, explains egoism in the morality of groups by the alleged transmutation of altruism at the level of individual morality into collective egoism at the group level. Though he gives few details of how this comes about, others with similar accounts have provided the rudiments of an explanation of how it works. Robert Osgood, for example, says:

A citizen's dependence upon his nation assumes a distinct intimacy because he confers upon the object of his allegiance the

<sup>1</sup> Michael Walzer more recently seems to hold the view that the state is governed by a different morality from that of individuals. Unlike Niebuhr, however, he appears to believe that it is higher morality, one that at times should override the other. See his *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 254.