

Reinhold Niebuhr and Prescriptions for International Leadership

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Introduction

Reinhold Niebuhr's prescriptions for international leadership chart a middle way between realist and liberal extremes. Specifically, while empirical research in international relations offers useful explanations for how and why certain states come to dominate or "lead" the international system, normative prescriptions about how leading states *should behave* tend to focus on either realist-style prudence or integrationist liberalism. What is missing for a status quo state like the US is a set of normative guidelines that a) move beyond the reductionism of pure national self-interest but b) decline to overturn national sovereignty and the international system. Along these lines, Niebuhr rejected pure realism for its political nihilism; however, as a Christian realist, Niebuhr maintained that relations between groups should be based on politics, not ideals. Therefore, this paper assembles Niebuhr's vision of international leadership and its prescriptions and finds Niebuhr's vision a helpful antidote to the conventional realist/liberal divide.

International Leadership – Theories and Prescriptions

Empirical Theories

Leading powers in international politics remain an ongoing object of empirical and normative study. Empirical scholarship on this topic focuses on how great powers, like Britain and the United States, ascend to a position of preeminence amongst their peers and then attempt to shape or manipulate the international environment.¹ Perhaps the most pervasive influence on this kind of work flows from the realist school of international relations, which maintains that anarchy – in other words, no overarching governance – defines relations between states.² Thus, states can only rely on themselves for survival and will adopt strategies of balancing against or

¹ For a general history of great power ascent and decline, see Kennedy 1987

² Waltz 1979

bandwagoning with lead states depending upon which state proves most menacing.³ In turn, as Waltz argued about the United States after the Cold War, a single leading or “unipolar” state can use its preeminent position however it desires, but that dominant position will be challenged and dissipate as other powers work to balance the lead state.⁴

Many scholars dissent from the realist emphasis on security calculations and competing alliance structures. For Robert Gilpin, hegemonic states inevitably arise given uneven economic growth and, in turn, military capacity.⁵ Once ascendant, these hegemons provide international public goods, like secure trade routes, to protect a profitable and secure international order.⁶ Such expenditures inevitably lead to overstretch, but, crucially, the system remains stable as long as the costs of displacing the hegemon remain greater than the costs of status quo. In addition to maintaining that lead states work to shape the world’s economic, political and military environment, long-cycle and power transition theorists also observe that leading states usually fight to defend their preeminent positions against challengers when the relative material capabilities of the first decline and those of the second are increasing.⁷

Liberal IR scholars take a step further and focus on international economic and political institutions. Here, researchers observe that modernity’s liberal democracies tend to trade with rather than fight one another, and that as hegemons, their power projection involves a strong element socialization rather than simple coercion.⁸ The key here is that lead states use institutions to “co-bind” with other actors and reduce the dangers of anarchy.⁹ Liberals

³ Mearsheimer 2001

⁴ Waltz 2000, 27-32

⁵ Gilpin 1981

⁶ World-systems scholars argue that capitalist hegemony is rather less benign than this vision. See Wallerstein 2005, 42-59

⁷ Modelski and Thompson 1996; Organski and Kugler 1983; Tammen 2001

⁸ Ikenberry and Kupchan 1990

⁹ Deudney and Ikenberry 1999

especially focus on America's post-World War II "empire of integration," in which the lead state built institutions with European, and later non-European, actors as junior partners.¹⁰

Normative Prescriptions

Some normative prescriptions for international leadership arise within each of these formulations of international politics. For leaders as well as all other states, realists prescribe prudence as the guide to behavior, and they maintain that "interest defined as power is an objective category which is universally valid."¹¹ In other words, moral ambitions diverge between states, so states are only obliged to carefully define and pursue their interests rather than moral visions. For instance, Christopher Layne characterized George W. Bush's grand strategy as a move toward global US hegemony justified, in part, by the moral good of spreading democracy. However, Layne continued, what the US *should* do is protect its interests by remaining an "offshore balancer" that expands economically, not territorially.¹² Realists concede that international institutions and economic development are useful to generate wealth, so lead states like the US today should seize its unique "unipolar moment" to "change the international system in [America's] long-term security interests."¹³

The hegemonic and systemic literatures of Gilpin and others move beyond realism, but they offer few normative prescriptions.¹⁴ Since these theories expect little from lead states than pursuit of self-interest as power, they might be said normatively to reflect realism by default. Still, scholars in this vein do offer some prescriptions about maintaining stable international systems as well as peaceful systemic transitions from one lead state to another.¹⁵ Their point,

¹⁰ Lundestad 1998; see also Lake 1998 for a similar, though not strictly liberal, theory.

¹¹ Morgenthau 1978, 4-15

¹² Layne 2006, 6-22

¹³ Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008

¹⁴ Flint and Falah 2004 moves in this direction by tying America's hegemonic "prime morality" to just war theory.

¹⁵ See for example Doran 1991, 143-189

broadly speaking, is that a prudent lead state acting in its true self-interest will resist the urge use violence to forestall its declining systemic leadership.

In contrast, liberals and cosmopolitans argue that a lead state should diffuse and bind its power – and a degree of its sovereignty – through international law and institutions. This view traces back to Kant’s notion of a “perpetual peace” between commercial republics, which would be loath to war with one another owing to trade connections and citizen opposition.¹⁶ In this tradition, liberal IR scholarship often binds up prescriptions for lead states with empirical research of lead states. Arguing, for example, that the US has pursued liberal internationalism since World War II and then prescribing liberal internationalism as a normative good are two branches of the same tree.¹⁷ Cosmopolitans take this logic a step further by calling for a global demos in which governance transcends borders.¹⁸ Such governance would require revolutionary changes to the international system. Lead states in particular would play an important role: without their active, material support, a cosmopolitan project would fail. Though the idea of great powers willingly surrendering exclusive sovereignty seems counterintuitive, cosmopolitanism simply extends liberal democratic interests to a global level.

The Realist – Liberal Divide

Taken as poles on a normative spectrum, realism expects little from a leading international state beyond prudent self-interest, while cosmopolitanism expects a lead state to subsume its sovereignty in a global polity. Systemic theories and liberalism might operate inside these extremes, but they still tend to cluster around one end or the other. More to the point, neither offers specific guidance about how international leaders, as states with unique powers and responsibilities, should behave. This distinction is key: both realists and liberals treat all

¹⁶ Kant 1991

¹⁷ Bacevich 2002, 2-3

¹⁸ For a well-known and thorough example, see Held 1995; see also Archibugi 2008

states as legal equals, yet neither school of thought imagines that power inequalities are irrelevant. In terms of prescriptions for behavior, then, the same norms that apply to Luxembourg and Lesotho are active for the United States and China. This is not a tenable situation. From another perspective, for an actor like today's United States, there exists no prescription for international leadership that steers between self-interest and self-effacement. More generally, what might be a legitimate set of prescriptions for proper international leadership?

Niebuhr's Christian realism and his notions of responsible international leadership offer one answer to these questions. The following sections, therefore, briefly review Niebuhr's realism and his political ethic, outline his view of international politics and, finally, describe his prescriptions for international leadership.

Niebuhr's Christian Realism and Political Ethics

Christian realism is "a reminder of our limits and an affirmation of our hope."¹⁹ It is based in the Christian view that all humans, while originally intended for good, are inevitably prone to evil and selfish deeds. This propensity, suggest Christian realists, is particularly notable in politics, where human failings are both public and aggregated into collectivities.

Nevertheless, Christian realists are not pessimists. Niebuhr in particular considered himself a liberal and remained optimistic that both justice and order could be achieved through a careful commitment to both institutions and balances of power.²⁰

This notion of Christian realism gained traction among the generation of American Protestant theologians who grew up in the early years of the twentieth century, witnessed disillusionment with "utopianism" after World War I and committed themselves to the fight

¹⁹ Lovin 2008, 1

²⁰ Brown 2002, 292

against fascism as both a pragmatic and a just cause. By the mid-1940s, these thinkers were uniquely placed to firmly support, simultaneously, just international coercion in an incipient Cold War as well as a new world order centered on liberal institutions like the United Nations.²¹

Niebuhr's realism begins with two tenets. First, owing to original sin, humans are sinners and even when their intentions are truly good, their tendency to egoism and self-love taints their thoughts and actions. Second, this sinfulness aggregates in communities, and in fact, individuals are likely to express a vicarious will-to-power through the state that is unavailable to them in their personal lives.²² Furthermore, "Human egotism makes large-scale co-operation upon a purely voluntary basis impossible;" thus, "governments must coerce."²³ For Niebuhr, humans are by nature social and only realize their true life in community, but because egoistic impulses like narrow self-interest and avoiding responsibility, communities must be governed by power if they are to avoid degenerating into anarchy.²⁴ The irony here is that no person or institution can be trusted to wield power with objectivity or disinterest.²⁵ On the one hand, idealists insist on the goodness of man and are victimized by those with a will to power, but on the other, coercion is dangerous to wield and, in general, strident realism "becomes morally cynical or nihilistic" when it assumes that the universal negatives of human nature should be taken as normative.²⁶

To address these dangerous ironies between order and anarchy, between human sin and human community, Niebuhr offers two major solutions. First, he appeals to the balance of power. "We cannot trust the motives of any ruling class or power," he says, so "that is why it is important to maintain democratic checks upon the centers of power."²⁷ While truly rational

²¹ Warren 1997, 3 and 94-102

²² Niebuhr 1949, 218 and 228; Niebuhr 1932, xii

²³ Niebuhr 1940, 14

²⁴ Niebuhr 1941, 244 and 257

²⁵ Niebuhr 1949, 229

²⁶ Niebuhr 1940, 5-6; Niebuhr 1977a, 130

²⁷ Niebuhr 1940, 14-15

decision-making in human affairs would make genuine justice possible, true rationality is invariably stymied by self-interest. As in the US system of “checks and balances,” though, Niebuhr agrees with James Madison that “ambition may be made to check ambition.” In such a system, “threat of force against recalcitrant minorities is always implied” but rarely applied so that force remains rare. Similarly, as this paper finds, balances of international power are also profitable under certain conditions.

Second, Niebuhr decouples collective from individual morality. “A sharp distinction,” he declares, “must be drawn between the moral and social behavior of individuals and of social groups.”²⁸ Here,

Individual men may be moral in the sense that they are able to consider interests other than their own in determining problems of conduct, and are capable, on occasion, of preferring the advantages of others to their own. They are endowed by nature with a measure of sympathy and consideration for their kind ... Their rational faculty prompts them to a sense of justice which the educational discipline may refine and purge of egoistic elements until they are able to view a social situation, in which their own interests are involved, with a fair measure of objectivity. But all these achievements are more difficult, if not impossible, for human societies and social groups.²⁹

Morality that is applicable to individuals, then, is impractical for societies because they must coerce their citizens and must worry about ends more than means.³⁰ Some societies may be more rational than others and can minimize the use of force; however, there are certain “elements in man’s collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience.”³¹ In such a world, “Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power.”³² International conflict, in turn, is also inevitable because no degree of sympathy will permit individuals “to see and to

²⁸ Niebuhr 1932, xi

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ *Ibid*, 233-234

³¹ *Ibid*, xii

³² *Ibid*, xv

understand the interests of others as vividly as they understand their own.”³³ Despite this seemingly dark reality, Niebuhr draws upon Augustine to insist that this Biblical vision of human nature need not devolve into cynicism. Specifically, it recognizes that “the corruption of human freedom may make a behavior pattern universal without making it normative.” In other words, neither societies nor individuals need to abandon their aspirations for justice just because they recognize the reality of sin and its consequences (i.e. coercive governance).

At the center of Niebuhr’s Christian realism is irony. Humans are social, but human sin inevitably corrupts community. Corrupted communities require the application of actions like violence, but these actions are immoral at an individual level. By appealing to a balance of power within and between polities and hiving off “immoral society” from “moral man,” Niebuhr offers some means for humans to live in community while avoiding the extremes of anarchy and tyranny. Drawing from this foundation, the following sections elaborate on Niebuhr’s views of international politics and then, specifically, proper leadership within international politics.

International Politics and International Community

States, Civilizations and International Community

Niebuhr’s work describes an international world of nations and civilizations in which true community is unlikely and the level of violence depends upon cultural and moral factors. At the broadest levels of analysis, Niebuhr identifies civilizations as major fixtures in international history; however, as cultural entities, they remain less coherent than other forms of human organization.³⁴ Crucially, these civilizations can encompass more than one polity and may oscillate between “creative” and “oppressive” periods in which the elite are more and less able to

³³ *Ibid*, xiii-xiv

³⁴ Niebuhr 1949, 216-217

harmonize their will-to-power with social requirements for unity.³⁵ Externally, civilizations are threatened by “barbarians,” whose raw will-to-power often brings them an edge where “intellectual sophistication” and the vices of wealth distance the civilized from an innate understanding of power.³⁶ Overall, states often embody the values and strengths of their broader civilization.

The modern nation-state, in turn, is the locus of Niebuhr’s international thinking. They command both territory and allegiance and are “the human group of strongest social cohesion, of most undisputed central authority and of most clearly defined membership.”³⁷ In some ways nations and states live and die as do individuals, and they even “have the capacity to stand beyond themselves, observe and estimate their behavior, and trace the course of their history” in a way that offers individuals within them a stable identity to weather history’s vicissitudes.³⁸ In turn, they are also the object for citizens’ egoistic ambitions for power, a view espoused by classical realists like Morgenthau.³⁹ This self-consciousness is even the root of imperialism.⁴⁰ Rather than a voluntary contract between rational actors, “The nation is a corporate unity, held together much more by force and emotion, than by mind.”⁴¹

State morality, meanwhile, is defined by hypocrisy.⁴² In order to fulfill the “double claim” upon citizens as both their unique community and the embodiment of universal ideals, states claim to be as moral as the best-intentioned of individuals. This is inevitably a lie because states are exclusively driven by self-interest – they are neither able nor obliged to sympathize

³⁵ *Ibid*, 223

³⁶ Niebuhr 1940, 117

³⁷ Niebuhr 1932, 83

³⁸ Niebuhr 1951, 83

³⁹ Niebuhr 1932, 93

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 42

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 88

⁴² *Ibid*, 95

with the plights of others.⁴³ Since states lack this ability to transcend themselves, “it is natural that national attitudes can hardly approximate the ethical.” Nevertheless, states can at least attempt to pursue an ethical course, particularly when self-interest overlaps with ethical action, such as fighting the fascist powers or implementing the Marshall Plan in Europe.

Inter-state relations, meanwhile, grow more conflictual the more competing interests clash. International chaos is a real possibility for Niebuhr, particularly when civilizations or states leave a “creative” in favor of an “oppressive” phase. To the liberals hoping to banish conflict between states, Niebuhr insists that conflict “remains as a permanent rather than a passing characteristic of their relations to each other.”⁴⁴ Yet Niebuhr also suggests that states can negotiate competing claims of self-interest if the states owe allegiance to “a higher value.” In the early Cold War, for example, Niebuhr suggested that a “common civilization of free nations” would have muted the sharply competing visions of world order espoused by the US and the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ Ultimately, great powers set the tone of the international system, because it is they that are able to coerce when interests conflict.

Beyond competing interests and conflict, Niebuhr identified other phenomena shaping the modern international system. By the 1950s, class warfare and the communist discourse, for example, had come to define international relations as poor states struggled to modernize. Often, states failing to improve their economic productivity came to blame the hegemonic US as an imperial power responsible for extracting wealth from the periphery.⁴⁶ Another uniquely modern challenge was that “technics have established a rudimentary world community but have not

⁴³ *Ibid*, 84-85

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 3

⁴⁵ Niebuhr 1977a, 136

⁴⁶ Niebuhr 1952, 109-110

integrated it organically, morally or politically.”⁴⁷ Without some form of integration, “technics” brought economically interdependent states into closer contact without providing some means to alleviate conflicts of interest.

Yet even as Niebuhr calls for greater moral and political integration, his work remains skeptical of true international community. Certainly Niebuhr suggests that “as powerful classes organize a nation, so powerful nations organize a crude society of nations,” yet peace is tentative for both because it is an unjust peace.⁴⁸ More to the point, if a society or community is to be stable, it must be organically achieved. Europeans, Indians and East Asians, for example, may have been periodically – or even frequently – riven by state competition, but geography and culture have conspired to bring those regions together as civilizations. In contrast, a “world community” does not exist and remains unlikely, and the efforts of liberals to create such a community – or even a world government – by fiat “adds a touch of pathos to already tragic experiences.”⁴⁹ Not only do these schemes ignore the power of egoism and individual identification with the state, but they raise the specter of global tyranny once all power is invested in one authority. Ultimately, the “paradox of patriotism” reigns: while patriotism shifts devotion to a national community, the community of mankind “is too vague to inspire devotion.”⁵⁰

Solutions to the Problems of Power

As usual, though, Niebuhr is not totally pessimistic about international politics and the possibility of drawing nations together in a fruitful accord. The balance of power, for example, remains an imperfect solution to the problem of international order, but it does not necessarily

⁴⁷ Niebuhr 1977c, 15-16; Niebuhr 1932, 86

⁴⁸ Niebuhr 1932, 19-25

⁴⁹ Niebuhr 1977c, 17

⁵⁰ Niebuhr 1932, 92

need to devolve into chaos provided there exists a proper “organizing center” to control it. The problem, of course, is that no way has yet been found to establish an adequate organizing center that will balance states that overreach their bounds and trammel on the rights and interests of other states.⁵¹ Nevertheless, as in World War II, states may agree to balance a foe whose ambitions are so inimical to the status quo that resisting that aggressor is a moral and self-interested imperative. Similarly, as in domestic politics, unity in international politics is most likely to be achieved by a dominant group that imposes its will.⁵²

Finally, just as individuals can find “new life” in Christ when they “die to the old self,” a new life is possible for nations. Despite the difficulties, declares Niebuhr,

The new life which we require collectively in our age is a community wide enough to make the world-wide interdependence of nations in a technical age sufferable; and a justice carefully enough balanced to make the dynamic forces of a technical society yield a tolerable justice rather than an alteration of intolerable anarchy and intolerable tyranny.⁵³

In other words, though world community by fiat is implausible, interdependence has come upon the world and something must be done to moderate the tensions of living in close proximity.

International Leadership and the Responsibilities of Power

So far, then, we have seen, first, that Niebuhr distinguishes individual from collective morality and, second, that in international politics, as with individuals, self-interest and the will-to-power constrain the moral goods that states can pursue. Despite these realities, though, Niebuhr also calls for a “new life” in which states form at least a rudimentary society in order to limit the evil they do to one another. How Niebuhr addresses this tension as well as how that solution involves an ethic of international leadership is the object of this final section.

⁵¹ Niebuhr 1940, 26

⁵² Niebuhr 1932, 4-5

⁵³ Niebuhr 1977b, 114

The Irony and Temptations of Power

For Niebuhr, lead states are special cases in international politics because they wield great power. They have achieved the ambition of all international actors (and individual people) to shape history in their favor, but it also means they are under great temptations to self-aggrandizement at the cost of responsible leadership. This is the irony of power: it is necessary to maintain order, but it also enables actors to live out their selfishness. The United States, for example, “succeeded more obviously than any other nation in making life ‘comfortable,’ only finally to run into larger incongruities of human destiny by the same achievements by which it escaped the smaller ones.”⁵⁴ Americans hoped that they could be both materially successful and morally innocent in the world, but as twentieth century events revealed, this was a chimera. Inevitably, the force of collective self-interest means states must act selfishly, so powerful states are able to act the most selfishly, even if only in response to threats from other actors. The irony is that states uniquely situated to fill a global need for responsible leadership wait for “an obvious coincidence between national and ideal interests” before they consciously pursue a moral course of action.⁵⁵

This irony of power is made more stark by the temptations of power. For example, Niebuhr warns “victorious nations” that “they are wrong to regard their victory as a proof of their virtue, lest they engulf the world in a new chain of evil by their vindictiveness.”⁵⁶ He repeatedly warns “powerful and secure nations” that their pride and self-righteousness will be their undoing by arousing resentment and fear among other states, whose interests and views they disregard.⁵⁷ Both sins of commission and omission are possible here because imperialism as well as

⁵⁴ Niebuhr 1952, 63

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 36-37

⁵⁶ Niebuhr 1977b, 113

⁵⁷ Niebuhr 1952, 135; Niebuhr 1977c, 30

isolationism represent disavowing fundamental responsibilities to “fellowmen.”⁵⁸ The US, for example, needed to give up on its isolationism, “otherwise either we will seek escape from responsibilities which involve unavoidable guilt, or we will be plunged into avoidable guilt by too great confidence in our virtue.”⁵⁹

The Responsibility of Power

Despite these ironies and temptations, Niebuhr does not argue that power should be avoided or should be somehow redistributed amongst all the international actors; rather, he insists on the “responsibilities of power.” Certainly where nations exist in community or in a shared civilization, just as individuals share community in domestic politics, they must strive to perfect that community through “calculations of justice.”⁶⁰ Similarly, though God is the final arbiter of man’s current disorder, “we do have responsibility for proximate victories” until the day of final judgment.⁶¹ In dealing more exclusively with international politics, Niebuhr finds that because humans are drawn to relationship and because modern technology has profoundly deepened individual and international interdependence, “we could neither be secure in an insecure world nor find life worth living if we bought our security at the price of civilization’s doom.”⁶² For instance, American conservatives had failed to “come to terms with hazards and responsibilities which the growing hegemony of this youthful but powerful nation involved.”⁶³ They had oscillated between isolationism, which failed to appreciate the extent of “our responsibilities to a larger world,” and adventurism, which failed to respect the limits of strength available even to a great power.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr 1952, 38; Niebuhr 1940, 65

⁵⁹ Niebuhr 1952, 41

⁶⁰ Niebuhr 1953, 137

⁶¹ Niebuhr 1977a, 116. In turn, “Christian life without a high sense of responsibility for the health of our communities, our cultures degenerate into an intolerable other-worldliness.”

⁶² Niebuhr 1952, 131

⁶³ Niebuhr 1953, 54

If powerful states have responsibilities in international politics, what shape should those responsibilities take? Unfortunately, Niebuhr offers no exclusive analysis of responsible international leadership; nevertheless, a picture of this type of leadership emerges from his comments on the challenges of just power as well as the characteristics of responsible power. Given egoism and the will-to-power, perhaps the single greatest challenge to responsibility for leading states is a “too consistent devotion to their own interests.”⁶⁴ Niebuhr insists that states cannot be expected to exceed “prudent self-interest,” yet he repeatedly insists that both men and states must use their power to pursue justice broader than their own self-interest.⁶⁵ States cannot always expect a perfect coincidence between moral goods and material self-interest because both states and individuals suffer an internal tension between claims of self-interest and larger claims. “Whether the second claim is tolerably met,” declares Niebuhr regarding these larger claims, “represents a spiritual issue beyond the mere calculations of prudence.”⁶⁶ Furthermore, failing to act responsibly can have practical as well as moral ramifications. Narrow self-interest particularly can obscure larger, long-term interests, such as America’s shared goals with democratic states. For the US after World War II, the challenge of responsible leadership involved entering into entangling community with the “old world” while accepting that such a relationship would involve the moral ambiguities of power politics.⁶⁷ A responsible lead state, therefore, endeavors to walk a paradoxical line between prudent self-interest and taking actions to benefit the larger community (though in the long term, helping a larger community may redound to the benefit of the powerful state).

⁶⁴ Niebuhr 1940, 97

⁶⁵ Niebuhr 1952, 40; Niebuhr 1932, 238

⁶⁶ Niebuhr 1949, 97

⁶⁷ Niebuhr 1952, 79 and 133

In addition, Niebuhr highlights a number of characteristics that mark a responsible great power. One of the most fundamental but least tangible is a sense of humility. Niebuhr regularly emphasizes the limits of power and the inevitable self-interest of state motivations, so a sense of humility in the face of these constraints can help a powerful state avoid egregious injustices against its fellow actors.⁶⁸ More concretely, Niebuhr also emphasizes pragmatism. He describes an “instinct for the possible” that may flow from experience or Christian wisdom but that strives to navigate between the cynicism of competing interests and idealism of abstract formulae.⁶⁹ One way to direct state actions toward moral ends is to “place it in the hands of a community, which transcends the conflicts of interest between nations and has an impartial perspective upon them.”⁷⁰ To this end, Niebuhr supported the United Nations in addition to supporting a democratic balance of power within states. Given the imperfect nature of both man and his communities, Niebuhr saw these sorts of “impartial tribunals” as the “most obvious check” – though not an infallible check – upon rampant self-interest. Clear examples of these ideas are European conservatism and the British empire. Traditional European conservatism enjoyed “superior insights” from an aristocratic tradition involving “long ages of responsibility.” Unlike many modern liberals, these statesmen understood the nature of power politics, the limitations of short-term plans and the supremacy of long-term planning.⁷¹ Unlike modern American conservatives, they relied upon statesmanship and diplomacy as much as military might. An admirer of Burke, Niebuhr insisted that “if we are at all successful in sustaining our political hegemony in the free world we will become the more successful by the accretion of

⁶⁸ Niebuhr 1977b, 138; Niebuhr 1977b, 30-31

⁶⁹ Niebuhr 1953, 64 and 67; 1952, 143

⁷⁰ Niebuhr 1932, 110 and 238

⁷¹ Niebuhr 1949, 54

experience.”⁷² The British, meanwhile, “exceeded all modern nations ... in combining moral purpose with political realism.”⁷³ Often acting as true conservatives, they maintained their organic form of governance as they sought to work with native systems of governance and, in some cases, pursue humanitarian goals. That said, Niebuhr also acknowledged the real and pernicious injustices committed by a British empire ultimately driven by self-interest.

Finally, Niebuhr also gives some substantive direction for the modern, responsible power. Specifically, the “inchoate world order” of the interwar years required “global political organs for the better integration of its life.”⁷⁴ Though humans cannot create community by fiat, neither must a recognition of such limitations lead states to betray their cherished values and historical goals. One way the United Nations could do this was to bring power “under social and moral review” by democratic publics and politicians around the world.⁷⁵ This would help a lead state (i.e. the US) to avoid slipping into pretensions of omniscience or self-righteousness. Driven by the “lash of fear and the incitement of hope,” modern states face threats to their very civilizations and are obliged to “enlarge the human community so that the principle of order and justice will govern the international as well as the national community.”⁷⁶ Crucially, though, forming this kind of community requires that the lead state resist expanding its ambitions into the sovereignty of its junior partners.⁷⁷ “Hegemony is inevitable,” says Niebuhr about the US in the modern world, “and so is the peril of a new imperialism, which is inherent in it.” The key to overcoming this peril involves “arming all nations great and small with constitutional power to resist the exactions of dominant power.”⁷⁸ In other words, leading states, for their own sakes as well as for

⁷² *Ibid*, 72

⁷³ Niebuhr 1940, 60; Niebuhr 1932, 108-109

⁷⁴ Niebuhr 1932, 142

⁷⁵ Niebuhr 1952, 135

⁷⁶ Niebuhr 1941, 284-285

⁷⁷ Niebuhr 1932 139

⁷⁸ Niebuhr 1941, 285

the sake of moral good, should strive to form a world community in which their power is constrained, perhaps by institutions, but in which they are also able to pursue their own interests within the bounds of responsible leadership.

Conclusion

In the light of an empirical and normative dichotomy between realists and liberals, Niebuhr's approach is compelling. Pure realist tradition reduces all international state interests to power, and prescribes prudence as the only rudder to then navigate geopolitical shoals. On the other hand, liberals, and their more extreme cosmopolitan cousins, confidently make normative prescriptions that most commonly involve binding state power and sovereignty to international institutions. Between these poles, there is space for a normative model of international leadership that moves beyond pure national interest but preserves state sovereignty. In addition, neither tradition offers unique prescriptions for international leaders, whose distinct power and influence could involve unique responsibilities. What they lack is an ethical or moral theory of international leadership.

Niebuhr, an avowed liberal and an avowed realist, fills this gap. Though he never worked out a distinct ethic of international leadership, he clearly distinguished powerful and hegemonic states as unique actors with unique responsibilities. Such states are in no way obliged or able to live up to the standards of individual morality; nevertheless, cynically pursuing pure self-interest is both immoral and self-destructive. Furthermore, while Niebuhr saw the world as a conflictual realm of competing interests and wills-to-power, he also maintained that some combination of balance of power and organic international community could minimize conflict. In this milieu, prescriptions for ethical international leadership arise. Specifically, Niebuhr insists that responsibility comes with power, and that abdicating those responsibilities is both

immoral and self-destructive. The essential challenge here is that all states are inevitably selfish and should not be lured into utopianism, but they should also take actions that benefit the wider community of nations. Confronted by the irony and temptations of power, these states must adopt a spirit of humility and pragmatism to recognize both the limits of their own power as well as the interests of other states. Niebuhr points to European conservatism and a Burkean vision of the British empire as examples here, but for the modern world, he prescribes some type of constitutional binding between states. Lead states need not surrender their sovereignty to international institutions, but by supporting and then submitting to such institutions, their motives and interests can be checked in a balance of power. Such arrangements do not guarantee an organic world community in which states can appeal to shared values to mitigate conflict, but they can move the international system in that direction.

Clearly, Niebuhr's prescriptions for international leadership suffer underdevelopment in critical areas. For instance, Niebuhr straddles the line between "prudent self-interest" and resisting an unhealthy devotion to self-interest, but the precise balance to strike between these poles remains unclear and examples of this dynamic in action are not forthcoming. Relatedly, Niebuhr calls for institutions and supports the UN, but what sort of enforcement mechanisms beyond "naming and shaming" can be pursued while still honoring state sovereignty? Finally, how does a lead state persuade and coerce other great powers to follow its lead without falling into the traps and temptations of power?

Such practical concerns are not devastating, however, because as a set of principles, Niebuhr's prescriptions for international leadership coherently unite realism's prudence and liberalism's institutions. Like Edmund Burke before him, Niebuhr is leery of great power in the hands of one state, but he knows such power can and should be wielded for good against unjust

regimes. With great power, then, comes great responsibility. Though a familiar truism, neither modern realism nor modern liberalism treat powerful states as morally different than any other state. In some sense, the motivation for both schools of thought is democratic: they respect the sovereignty and rights of any given state and, in the case of liberalism, this equality is supposed to constrain powerful state behavior. As Niebuhr would point out, though, all states are too self-interested to be trusted even when they are bound together in international institutions, but powerful states are unique in that they are able to coerce other states. Thus, leading states have greater responsibilities, but these responsibilities must be enforced within the framework of a “constitutional” balance of power. In turn, responsible great powers also recognize the limits of their own power and are able to advance their long-term interests without “exceed[ing] the bounds of historical possibilities.”⁷⁹ Ultimately, responsible international leadership is not an ideal but a practical expression of both self-interest and moral commitment. By sliding too easily into cynicism or optimism and mutually failing to account for the unique moral hazards and responsibilities of great powers, realists and liberals offer dangerously incomplete prescriptions for international leadership. In contrast, though Niebuhr’s vision of responsible leadership remains somewhat hazy on the details of implementation, it offers a foundation durable enough to weather the rigors of both history and idealism.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr 1952, 143

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