

Insecurity and Injustice

The Washington Post recently reported that our government has a secret network of prisons in Eastern Europe to interrogate “high value” terror suspects. Ironically some of these prisons are reported to be in old Soviet-era compounds. These revelations along with reports of torture and abuse in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay raise the questions: Has the war on terror gone too far? Are we in danger of becoming evil to overcome evil?

During the Cold War the ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr served as a voice for America’s moral conscience by consistently raising *this* danger. He warned that America’s great power combined with our moral idealism was a set-up for “sin” or “injustice”. For example, in his book the *Irony of American History*, published during the Korean War, Niebuhr provides the following warning, which seems equally relevant today. He writes, “We may be too secure in both our sense of power and our sense of virtue to be ready to engage in a patient chess game with the recalcitrant force of historic destiny. We could bring calamity upon ourselves and the world by forgetting that even the most powerful nations and even the wisest planners of the future remain themselves creatures as well as creators of the historical process. [Humans] cannot rise to a simple triumph over historical fate.” Niebuhr’s remarks seem prophetic in regards to the lofty ambitions of the Iraq war. Quickly transforming Iraq into a model for democracy now seems unrealistic just because of that country’s history—the history of Islam, the historical relations between the Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites, and the British occupation.

Due to these kinds of insights, several commentators have noted the need for Niebuhr’s voice in today’s public debates about the War on Terror. For example, the conservative commentator David Brooks writes that “the mid-century [liberal] theologian may have got a lot of things wrong—but we could use a thinker like him today.” Brooks calls Niebuhr “one of America’s most profound writers on war and international conflict.”

Niebuhr was not a pacifist. He was a moral realist and hard-nosed liberal. In the years leading up to World War II, he spoke against isolationism and the need to confront totalitarianism with force. And, during the Cold War he was a consistent voice for stopping the spread of communism. In 1964 he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

However, while believing that military force must sometimes be used, he constantly warned that its use was inevitably corrupting. Niebuhr carefully explains the relationships between the use of power and injustice in his 1941 book, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The book was first given as a series of lectures in Scotland. While Niebuhr spoke Nazi bombs could be heard exploding in the distance.

Niebuhr begins by observing that anxiety is permanent condition of freedom. Natural human freedom is the root of both human creativity and our tendency toward injustice. Human life is by its nature insecure. Illness and Misfortune can always be lurking around the corner—and if those two don’t get us Time will. Hence, it’s natural for us to feel

anxious. It is equally natural for us to use our power to make our lives more secure. We do not feel secure, so we grasp at power to make ourselves secure. However, if we become overly focused on our insecurity and overreach with our power, we can slide into committing injustices. Hence, anxiety is the precondition for injustice.

As a moral realist, Niebuhr would acknowledge the need for force to confront terrorism. But, he would warn of the dangers inherent in using power in the pursuit of security. Terrorism is designed to feed our anxieties and to make us obsessively focus on our insecurities.

This said, let's see how this discussion illuminates the debate about the morality of America's covert prisons. In response to European criticisms, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice argued that the ends justify the means; the use of secret prisons makes us more secure. However, we can never be completely secure. During the last election President Bush wisely admitted that the war on terror is not winnable by the use of power. The moral challenge is to decide how far we should go in using our power in pursuing our security. The combination of great power and great anxiety makes it all too easy to go too far.

So, where is the line between the justified use of power in seeking security and the abuse of this power that leads to injustices? That line may be difficult to accurately draw, but it is often clear when that line is crossed. If we are using the abandoned compounds of the old "evil empire" as secret prisons, it is time to listen to the voice of our moral conscience. It is time heed Niebuhr's warning about the irony of American history, the tendency to let our virtues slide into vices.

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