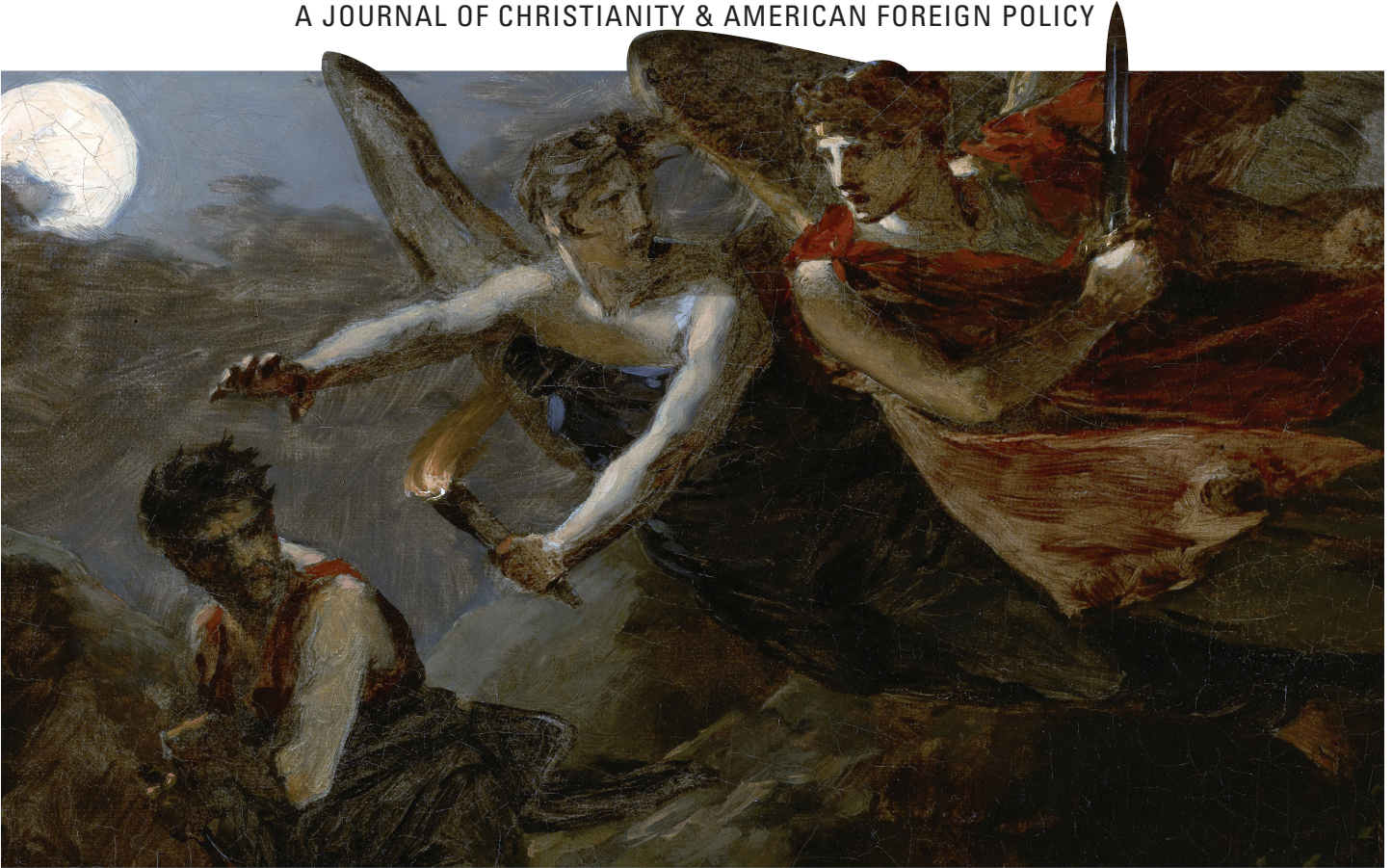


SPRING 2016 • NUMBER 3

PROVIDENCE

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIANITY & AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY



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In this WWII era poster urging Americans to purchase war bonds, Uncle Sam, spirit of America, is depicted pointing the way forward for the overwhelmingly powerful U.S. fighting forces. Source: Office of War Information, via Wikimedia Commons.

UNCREDIBLE: OBAMA & THE END OF AMERICAN POWER

MARC LIVECCHÉ

Fateful Junctures—In 1955, two years after the death of Joseph Stalin, the American theologian and political theorist Reinhold Niebuhr reasserted the basic premises of Christian realism. “If we are to gauge the available spiritual, moral, political, and cultural resources of our nation,” he argued, “which are available for the performance of our responsibilities at this fateful juncture of world history, it is advisable to begin with an analysis of the dominate trends and forces of contemporary history, which have created the unique perils and opportunities confronting us.”¹ Beginning with getting as accurate an assessment of the facts on the ground as one can, Christian realism insists on a sober-minded assessment of the prospects for peace, justice, and order at any given moment.

A mere decade after Adolf Hitler, Nazism, Auschwitz, and the other variegated horrors of the Second World War, and though the reign of Stalin was over and the grip of Stalinism itself was increasingly melting away under the relatively reform-minded thaw of Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet totalitarianism

was nevertheless progressing apace. And so Niebuhr understood the free world to be locked in a desperate contest against international communism, a system which he described as a “demonic politico-religious movement which has beguiled millions of people and made many nations captive by

generating a political dynamic through a compound of utopian illusions and power impulses.”

The free world, meanwhile, had a new champion in a nascent American superpower. “The exertions of the war,” Niebuhr wrote, “dissipated our neutralist illusions. When the war was over we emerged not only incomparably the most powerful of the free nations but committed to responsibilities commensurate with our power.”

Looking over the contemporary landscape of our own “fateful juncture” of history, some things have stayed the same—the free world is once again locked in a battle against totalizing regimes—both familiar and newly arrived. Some things, however, are different. In the afterglow of Obama’s heady promise of hope and change, the free world cannot count on American commitment to meet responsibilities commensurate with our still unrivaled, though abating, power.

THE CRISIS OF AMERICAN CUTBACK

Retrenchment is a foreign policy strategy designed to reduce a nation’s international and military commitments and subsequent costs—calculated both in treasure and blood. Such cutbacks can be accomplished by withdrawing from alliance obligations, scaling back on deployments abroad, or reducing international expenditures and defense spending.²

Such a strategy is evident in the Obama administration’s patterns of US military spending, force posture, strategy statements, and behavior. Admittedly, as scholar Colin Dueck rightly notes, it may appear odd to call Obama’s foreign policy one of retrenchment: he did, after all, violate the sovereign territory of another nation in order to hunt down Osama Bin Laden; he has endorsed a forward pivot toward Asia; and he dramatically ramped up the use of unmanned drone strikes against terrorist targets. Nevertheless, retrenchment, however moderated, is clear and present. Defense spending cuts (from

5% of GDP in 2010 to a projected 3% by the time Obama leaves office) have shown up in decreased numbers of weapons, personnel, soldiers, Marines, ships, and aircraft.³ As well, there has been a step-back in the kinds of military operations America conducts and, just as importantly, is prepared to conduct. This is a consequence of both philosophy as well as budgetary necessity—America can simply no longer afford to fight two major regional contingencies at the same time, nor conduct broad, heavy-footed counterinsurgency or prolonged stability operations.⁴ In their place, are the kinds of “innovative, low-cost and small footprint”⁵ operations that Obama best likes, characterized, as in his approach to terrorism, by drone strikes, Special Forces raids, and clandestine, CIA-aided rebel armies.⁶

This essay argues that there are undesirable costs to retrenchment and a downsized, overseas US military presence and scaled back American leadership. My focus will be primarily conceptual. I critique Obama’s foreign policy through the lens of Reinhold Niebuhr, to whom Obama has articulated a great deal of intellectual fidelity. However, in true Niebuhrian form, this conceptual analysis will necessarily be grounded in a practical concern. Following Dueck, I assert that “allies depend upon believable, material indicators of American commitment, including a strong military presence together with a credible readiness to use it. Adversaries are deterred by the same.” Against this assertion, the cost of retrenchment, especially in the Middle East, has been unnerved allies and emboldened adversaries. The cost of *that* is increased instability throughout the world. Because a core tenet of Niebuhr’s Christian realism is the shouldering of political responsibility and neighbor-care, I argue that Obama’s scuttling of American power has proved both un-neighborly and, indeed, un-Niebuhrlly.

As the Obama administration’s previous two National Security Strategy Documents attest, Obama has built his foreign policy on the belief that America’s most important priorities involve promoting liberal world order, rather

than playing classic geopolitics. Rather than such old-school preoccupations with territory and military power, Obama would rather focus instead on issues of common concern: trade liberalization, climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, human rights, the rule of law, and so on. As Walter Russell Mead put it, “The most important objective of US... foreign policy has been to shift international relations away from zero-sum issues to win-win ones.”⁷ The problem, Mead notes, is that China, Iran, and Russia never accepted the geopolitical settlement imagined by some in the West following the Cold War. And in light of Obama’s retrenchment, such adversary nations are united in their belief that the status quo must be revised, and they are making increasingly forceful attempts to do so.

Such competitor ambitions always make for potentially perilous conditions, but a forward leaning American posture has until now been a reliable resource for managing them. However, Obama’s clearly declared aversion to putting boots on the ground in any large-scale ground campaign, his deep preference for US allies to carry the lead in overseas security concerns, and his unwillingness to commit forces when core US interests are not at stake has clearly signaled to ally and adversary alike that America’s long-term trajectory is one of disengagement abroad in order to refocus on “nation building” at home.

The resulting power vacuums have also been clearly perceived, and Russia, China, and Iran, together with Islamist militants inside the Arab world and beyond, are only too happy to take a stab at filling them.⁸

We need only look at Obama’s bungling failure to enforce his infamous red line against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s gassing of civilians for a picture of how all this works.

THE COST OF AMERICAN WEAKNESS

Of course, what I call bungled is subject to interpretation. Indeed, according to the widely-noted Jeffrey Goldberg essay in *The Atlantic*, Obama regards his handling of the crisis as something like a triumph. For his

part, Goldberg recognizes that the Syrian red line crisis will be regarded by many—both detractors and supporters—as a signature moment in the Obama legacy. As he puts it:

Friday, August 30, 2013, the day the feckless Barack Obama brought to a premature end America’s reign as the world’s sole indispensable superpower—or, alternatively, the day the sagacious Barack Obama peered into the Middle East abyss and stepped back from the consuming void.

Ever since civil war engulfed Syria in 2011, Assad has been repeatedly accused of willful atrocities against civilian non-combatants. Obama, Goldberg notes, was horrified by the evils committed by the Syrian regime in its attempt to put down the rebellion, even declaring in the summer of 2011 that the time had come for Assad to step aside, though he did little to bring that resignation about. Then, in a 2012 press conference, Obama issued his first, more specific warning, a caution against the use of chemical weapons: “We have been very clear to the Assad regime,” he insisted, “...that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.” Emphasizing the point he added, “That would change my calculus. That would change my equation.” Later on he doubled down, “We have communicated in no uncertain terms... that that’s a red line for us and that there would be enormous consequences if we start seeing movement on the chemical weapons front or the use of chemical weapons. That would change my calculations significantly.”

That red line was crossed on August 21st, 2013 when surface-to-surface rockets containing the nerve agent sarin pounded the Damascus suburb of Ghouta, an area long-occupied by rebel fighters. Weather conditions aided the poison gas, heavier than air, in hugging the ground and seeping into the lower levels of buildings where people were seeking shelter against the shelling. Nerve agents work by hijacking the signaling between our nerves through blocking the enzyme that tells those signals to cease once they’ve done their job. Those enzymes obstructed, the neurotransmitters simply continue doing the things

they always do, but now without cessation. Within seconds of exposure, our muscles and secretions go crazy, the nose and eyes run, the mouth drools and froths and vomits, and the bowels and bladder evacuate. With enough exposure, the body experiences constriction of the chest, convulsions, paralysis, and death.⁹ In Ghouta, nearly 1,500 people would die, including scores of children.

Much of the world was appropriately aghast. On August 30th, John Kerry delivered a thunderous speech—Goldberg called it Churchillian—denouncing the atrocity and “threaded with righteous anger and bold promises, including the barely concealed threat of imminent attack.” Goldberg tells us that Kerry’s contempt mirrored the overwhelming sentiment within the Obama administration that Assad had earned dire punishment. Ninety minutes after Kerry spoke, Obama reinforced his rhetoric in a public statement:

It’s important for us to recognize that when over 1,000 people are killed, including hundreds of innocent children, through the use of a weapon that 98 or 99 percent of humanity says should not be used even in war, and there is no action, then we’re sending a signal that that international norm doesn’t mean much. And that is a danger to our national security.

It appeared clear that Obama understood the scope of what had just happened, most especially in light of his red-lined warning. He ordered the Pentagon to draw up hit lists, and readied five US Navy destroyers in the Mediterranean to knock out regime targets. American allies, including his British and French counterparts, were convinced Obama meant to strike. More significantly, Saudi Arabia’s Adel al-Jubeir, the Kingdom’s ambassador to Washington, told his superiors in Riyadh that Obama “figured out how important this is...he will definitely strike.”

Of course, none of that happened. According to Goldberg, early in his first term Obama had come to judge that only a handful of threats in the Middle East could ever warrant direct US military intervention. Believing a president

should not put American warfighters at risk in order to prevent humanitarian disasters unless those disasters posed a direct security threat to the United States or its core interests, Obama did not believe that Assad’s action—however horrific—met that standard. The regime’s crossing of the red line might have changed Obama’s equation, but the final sum remained the same.

Falling back on his belief, in Goldberg’s phrasing, that the Washington foreign-policy establishment...makes a “fetish of credibility”, Obama argued that “dropping bombs on someone to prove you’re willing to drop bombs is just about the worst reason to use force.” He would justify inaction on other factors as well: the presence of UN inspectors on the ground, the failure of British Prime Minister David Cameron to obtain the consent of his parliament, fear that a strike would actually strengthen Assad’s hand, and concern that he might be moving past the limits of executive power.

Predictably, our allies were both incensed and unnerved. In the Middle East, increased doubts about Obama’s trustworthiness took root, as did new fears that he was distancing the US from traditional Sunni Arab allies and forging a new relationship with Iran—Assad’s Shia benefactor. The King of Jordan, Abdullah II, lamented, “I think I believe in American power more than Obama does.” For their part, the Saudis declared Iran to be the new great power in the Middle East. America had just abdicated her role.

REINHOLD NIEBUHR & THE NECESSITY OF AMERICAN POWER

Here we return to Reinhold Niebuhr. The son of a German-born minister of the German Evangelical Synod of North America, Niebuhr completed his own theological training at Yale Divinity School. While the bulk of his career would be spent at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, his time there was preceded by a personally formative pastoral stint in industrial Detroit, the scene of protracted and increasingly bitter labor-capital conflict



by which his own socialist leanings solidified. Despite this early formation, against 20th century history and the rise of the totalizing ideologies of fascism and communism, Niebuhr increasingly broke with his own liberal past and the cultural Christianity around him. He came to reject the unqualified assumptions that Christian ethics necessarily leads to socialist politics and pacifist foreign policy.

A person of great moral seriousness, Niebuhr refused to retreat from the seemingly intractable political and moral struggles of his time. Instead, insisting that a political ethic in the Christian view is *necessarily* an ethic of responsibility, he confronted those struggles, counseling others to do likewise and to do so *informed* by, not *despite*, Christian conviction; which meant that even as we struggle against political evil—however vast—we are obliged to remember that we are ourselves

finite and broken creatures whose political and moral actions—even if rescue operations—are both limited and compromised by finitude and sinfulness.

With this grounding in place, Niebuhr carved a narrow path between utopianism—the sentimentally naïve belief that justice, order, and peace can be fully realized *in* history—and extreme *realpolitik*—a cynical view of politics as simply the self-interested application of power for personal gain over the interests or even welfare of other nations. In doing so, Niebuhr enjoys the admiration of those searching for a way to be sober-minded about the limits of American power while avoiding isolationism, as well as of those seeking to defend American leadership abroad—even a notion of American exceptionalism—while side-stepping triumphalistic jingoism.

In the mind of *The New York Times*' David Brooks, this is precisely why Obama counts Niebuhr among his favorite philosophers. Obama was compelled by Niebuhr's insistence that the presence of evil in the world demands humility and modesty rather than cynicism and inaction, or a swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism. Obama's presidency, Brooks avers, is an attempt to thread that Niebuhrian needle.¹⁰

But there are inconsistencies when you juxtapose Obama's non-enforcement of his own red line and his fidelity to Niebuhrian realism. Among them is his apparent willingness to hamstring American power despite the threats arrayed around us.

However much Niebuhr counseled against hubris in light of the shared reality of human depravity, he didn't for a moment think judgments couldn't be made. Some people really are more decent, more kind, more just, and more loving than others. So too with nations. Regime-type matters, and not all ideologies are sufficiently moral to provide their political communities with even the approximate conditions necessary for human flourishing. In the fight against totalitarianism, Niebuhr was convinced that America was destined, because of both her objective greatness and her relative goodness, to play an indispensable role in so grand and awful a period of history. Moreover, he believed that American political decisions and commensurate actions would be fateful for the very survival of free nations.

Niebuhr famously understood democracy as the superior political preference. "The distinguishing mark of Anglo-Saxon democracy," he wrote, "is precisely the rigor with which even the power of majorities is checked in the interest of minorities, and every kind of political power is made responsible."¹¹ Against this basic equity, Niebuhr saw totalitarian regimes doing just the opposite:

If we seek to isolate the various causes of an organized evil which spreads terror and cruelty throughout the world and confronts us everywhere with faceless men who are immune to every form of moral and political



suasion, we must...begin with the monopoly of power... Disproportions of power anywhere in the human community are fruitful of injustice, but a system which gives some men absolute power over other men results in evils which are worse than injustice.¹²

This goes some distance in explaining both Niebuhr's vehement support of American entry into WWII as well as his support, in the context of the Cold War, for America's anti-Communist objectives. Perceiving Communist revolutions anywhere in the world to be a threat to American national security, Niebuhr believed it America's responsibility to prevent nonaligned countries from being turned toward Moscow.¹³ Because he believed America had a responsibility to prevent the turn to Moscow, he therefore believed America had a responsibility to cultivate and utilize the power necessary to do so.



I posit that not a lot has changed in the 21st century. In Russia and China, we find the familiar totalitarian adversaries of old. In Iran and radical Islamicists non-state actors such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State we find, perhaps, newer breeds.

Obama's failure to enforce his own red line in Syria helped embolden both. It all comes back to credibility. If our allies depend upon believable, material indicators that America is committed to their security, then credibility—including in the form of both a strong, forward military presence and the credible readiness to use it—is the coin of the realm. The other side of that coin is the ability to deter our adversaries.

In the darkening days of the late 1930s, when British and French Prime Ministers Neville Chamberlain and Édouard Daladier warned Adolf Hitler that the price of a German

invasion of Poland would be a European war, Hitler had little cause to take them at their word. Having suffered no repercussions after militarizing the Rhineland, annexing Austria, or dismembering Czechoslovakia, why ought he to have thought the Anglo-French threats anything but bluster?

Deterrence is in the mind of the adversary. In order for a threat against action to be effective, it has first to be believed. Belief requires at least that there is both capacity to carry out the threat, as well as the will to do so. While Hitler would have perceived Chamberlain and Daladier as having the military capacity to counter his aggression, they had already convinced him that they lacked the martial will to oppose him. Once credible deterrence is lost, restoring it in the mind of our adversaries will likely come only after significant costs—as the Second World War strongly suggests.

Consider Russia. Putin's actions since Obama blinked on the red line have been increasingly belligerent. His air force has repeatedly made incursions into European airspace; his military intimidates Sweden on multiple points, including through a tremendous uptick in the sailing of Russian submarines into the North Atlantic and even into Sweden's territorial waters, as well as by simulated bombing runs on Swedish cities; Russian jets have harassed US military ships and aircraft; Putin has repeatedly threatened Baltic States and former Soviet Republics, invaded and aided a rebellion in Ukraine; and has cast apocalyptic warnings against NATO allies, most recently Romania over the installation of a new anti-ballistic missile system. All this on the heels of Obama's allowing Putin to descend onto the Syrian stage like a *deus ex machina* and bail him out of the corner into which he had red-painted himself. Russia, not the US, has started looking like the indispensable nation in certain Middle East eyes.

The lesson seems clear: weakness is provocative, Obama has projected weakness, and Putin was provoked. When Obama declared in February of 2014, that there would be "costs" for Russian belligerence in Ukraine, Putin had already seen that playbook, having taken Obama's measure in Syria. He had no cause to believe that Obama had the intestinal fortitude to impose significantly deterring costs. Moreover, without doubt, China, Iran, and North Korea all took Obama's measure in Ukraine, and have followed the Russian lead in upping their own saber-rattling mockery of America, her interests, and her allies.

Meanwhile, our allies are unnerved. Israel has moved closer to longtime enemies in the region in order to counter Iran—not out of renewed trust in one another but because they no longer have confidence in American commitments to their security. In Asia, Japan and South Korea are increasingly fearing that the US nuclear umbrella is beginning to let some water through, and both nations are flirting with the idea of acquiring their own bombs. In the Levant itself, our moderate allies in the Syrian opposition have had every reason to lose faith in America. No one was

looking for a repeat of the Iraq experience, but we could have long ago started helping the moderates with weaponry, intelligence, and nonlethal assistance. Not having done so, and with Russian airstrikes helping to bolster Assad, even those moderate opposition forces realize they need a sponsor, and so regional al-Qaeda groups have been winning new adherents.

Backing away from reacting when Assad crossed that red line has desiccated confidence in American credibility not just in the Middle East but in Moscow, Tehran, Beijing, Pyongyang, and elsewhere. America bluffed, and now the world has taken measure of our bluster.

THE BETRAYAL OF NIEBUHR-LOVE

Christian realism, including in its Niebuhrian form, is grounded in the basic assumption that a political ethic is an ethic of responsibility. Informed by faith, the Christian realist presumes that those who love God are bound to love what He loves—that's just how it goes with love. Therefore, we are to love the world because history has made clear that *God* loves the world. To love something means we long for its genuine good; that is, we desire to see it flourish—to achieve the purposes of its creation.

If nothing else has, then 20th century history ought to have convinced us that things don't always flourish on their own. So not only must we desire that the things we love flourish, we must commit to helping them to do so. This is to take seriously that part of the Genesis account which declares, "Let us make mankind in our image." The most basic interpretation of this is found in the simple exegetical premise that the meaning of "made in the image" is found in what immediately follows: "Let us make mankind in our image... *and let them have dominion* over all the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth." To be made in the *imago Dei* is to be born into a natural responsibility to exercise, as a divine mandate, dominion—care—over all

creation. We have delegated responsibility *in* history for the conditions *of* history.

We can of course get a bit carried away with this, including—perhaps especially so—regarding matters of foreign relations. History does not, finally, depend on us. Our delegated responsibility is neither final nor ultimate but much more modestly qualified. In the exercise of political power—both soft and hard—we are, most basically, simply to resist evil, to do no harm, and to help where we can. We have a say, at least partially, both in how we act and in how we react to the actions of others. But, again, if nothing else has, then the 20th century ought to have taught us the horrors that can happen when we couple power to a bid for an ultimate role in history. Our responsibilities must never be replaced by ambitions—we will only ever approximate justice, order, and peace; we will never *realize* them.

So it is right to articulate a foreign policy characterized by both responsibility and limits. It is even right for this articulation to have a discernibly religious accent—for it is a very late idea that pits religion *against* politics. Religion has always been integrated with public life, informing and grounding political thought. For a particular stream of Christian realism, though not the Niebuhrian one, this responsibility-within-limits is articulated through the moral framework of the just war tradition. Within that framework, the classical view of just cause includes the punishment of evil, the taking back of what has been wrongly taken, and the defense of the innocent. In his bungling of the red line, Obama ignored the first and the last of these.

In doing so, he has shown his doctrine of retreat, to be a contradiction of love—in both its neighborly and Niebuhrian forms. While a Christian realist view does not require a return to American inclinations under Bush in the early years following 9/11, it without doubt stands opposed to reverting to anything approaching the disengagement that characterized American strategy in the interwar years preceding WWII and that led an entire world over the brink and into the conflagration of total war.

Not incidentally, Winston Churchill famously shared an anecdote about a conversation with Roosevelt in the closing months of WWII. He recalls that the American president asked what this soon-to-be-over war should one day be called. Churchill responded, “The Unnecessary War.” He insisted that the Second World War should have been easy to avoid. “If the United States had taken an active part in the League of Nations,” he wrote, “and if the League of Nations had been prepared to use concerted force...to prevent the re-armament of Germany, there was no need for further bloodshed.” At several further points, he noted, the Allies still could have resisted Hitler strongly enough to make him recoil. Strength, Churchill insisted, predictable strength and the credible willingness to use it might have changed 20th century history.

It is not too late to change the history of the 21st. **P**

Marc LiVecche, (PhD, University of Chicago), is a fellow at the Institute on Religion and Democracy, and managing editor of *Providence*.

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